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978-0-521-52077-5 - Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization Since 1870

Beverly J. Silver

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Forces of Labor

Recasting labor studies in a long-term and global framework, the book draws on a major new database on world labor unrest to show how local labor movements have been related to world-scale political, economic, and social processes since the late nineteenth century. Through an in-depth empirical analysis of select global industries, the book demonstrates how the main locations of labor unrest have shifted from country to country together with shifts in the geographical location of production. It shows how the main sites of labor unrest have shifted over time together with the rise or decline of new leading sectors of capitalist development and demonstrates that labor movements have been deeply embedded (as both cause and effect) in world political dynamics. Over the history of the modern labor movement, the book isolates what is truly novel about the contemporary global crisis of labor movements. Arguing against the view that this is a terminal crisis, the book concludes by exploring the likely forms that emergent labor movements will take in the twenty-first century.

Beverly J. Silver is Professor of Sociology at the Johns Hopkins University. She is coauthor (with Giovanni Arrighi) of *Chaos and Governance in the Modern World System* (1999). She has twice won the Distinguished Publication Award from the PEWS section of the American Sociological Association.

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Advance Praise for *Forces of Labor*

“Beverly Silver’s empirically rich and powerfully argued book provides the kind of historical and class analysis that has been so badly lacking in the globalization literature. Bravo!”

– Leo Panitch, York University

“By broadening the geography for understanding labor struggles, Silver shows us that these are going strong in many parts of the world even as they have weakened and fizzled in the North Atlantic. A great contribution to contemporary debates about the politics of contestation.”

– Saskia Sassen, The University of Chicago

“Beverly Silver’s new book is a challenge to political economists and economic sociologists and even to those historians who still care about capitalism’s trajectories. Avoiding the deceptive poles of both ‘race to the bottom’ pessimism and liberal optimism, availing herself of both an immense database and of deep historical knowledge, Silver traces the recurring rises and declines of the world labor movement along two dimensions of capital mobility: its spatial displacement and its shift to new product lines – both in response to labor militancy. Sweeping and detailed, ponderous but readable, comparative and historical, this book takes the political economy of world systems to a new level.”

– Sidney Tarrow, Cornell University

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AND GLOBALIZATION
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The Johns Hopkins University



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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521817516

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First published 2003

Reprinted 2005, 2006

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Silver, Beverly J.

Forces of labor : workers' movements and globalization since 1870 / Beverly J. Silver.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in comparative politics)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-81751-X – ISBN 0-521-52077-0 (pbk.)

1. Labor movement – History. 2. Labor disputes – History. 3. Capitalism – History.

4. Globalization – Economic aspects – History. 5. Business relocation – History.

6. Manufacturing processes – History. 7. Automobile industry workers – History.

8. Textile workers – History. I. Title. II. Series.

HD4851 .S55 2003

2002031361

ISBN 978-0-521-81751-6 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-52077-5 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2009

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The origins of this book can be traced back to a conference paper presented almost twenty years ago with Giovanni Arrighi at the Seventh Political Economy of the World-System conference organized by Charles Bergquist at Duke University. The paper, entitled “Labor Movements and Capital Mobility: the United States and Western Europe in World-Historical Perspective,” was a first attempt at understanding how outcomes for different national labor movements are linked to each other by world-economic processes, especially the transnational relocation of capital. Over the years, this first seed grew, fused with other seeds, and developed into the present book. Ongoing exchanges with Giovanni Arrighi over this entire time period have left an indelible mark on the final product, and I therefore start by acknowledging my intellectual debt to him.

Another debt is owed to the members of the World Labor Research Group – a group of faculty and graduate students who met regularly at the Fernand Braudel Center at Binghamton University in the 1980s. Apart from myself, the members of the research group were Giovanni Arrighi, Mark Beittel, John Casparis, Jamie Faricellia Dangler, Melvyn Dubofsky, Roberto Patricio Korzeniewicz, Donald Quataert, and Mark Selden. It was in the course of discussions within this group that it became clear that the serious study of labor movements from a global and historical perspective would require new types of data that were simply not available in existing compilations. In 1986 the group plunged into a massive data collection project, initiating the World Labor Group (WLG) database, on which this book stands.

It soon became clear that the creation of this database would require an enormous effort and that it risked never being completed. In order to be able to devote more time to the project, I abandoned the dissertation I

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had been working on and switched to a dissertation linked to the creation and analysis of the WLG database. It was in this context that Terence K. Hopkins (1928–1997), chair of my dissertation committee, left his profound imprint on what would eventually become this book. I also wish to thank Immanuel Wallerstein, another member of my dissertation committee, for his advice and support throughout this project.

Shortly after my arrival at Johns Hopkins University, I set up a small research group with three graduate students – Bruce Podobnik, Mahua Sarkar, and Nettie Legters. We met regularly in 1993 and, at the end of that year, presented the results of our work at the Social Science History Association meeting. I had come to believe that one of the most fruitful ways of proceeding with the project would be through a comparative analysis of global industries. It was in the context of discussions and research with this group that I took the first steps toward working out the comparative formulations that eventually became Chapter 3.

This comparative global industry research was partially supported by a grant from the sociology program of the National Science Foundation in 1993. This grant, together with a 1989 grant from the World Society Foundation (Zurich), provided important spurts of material and moral support at crucial moments in the project.

During the past ten years at Johns Hopkins, numerous graduate and undergraduate students have worked with me on the project in a variety of capacities that included helping to update and expand the WLG database. Sincere thanks are due to them all, along with my sincere apologies for not being able to acknowledge here by name each individual.

In the 1990s, I plunged into another major research project, which constituted both a significant detour from the road leading toward the speedy completion of this book, as well as an opportunity to think more deeply about the relationship between social unrest and the dynamics of world politics. The project originated in a Research Working Group at the Fernand Braudel Center on comparative world hegemonies and culminated in the book *Chaos and Governance in the Modern World System* (Minnesota 1999). This detour has, I hope, strengthened the analysis of the relationship among labor movements, war, and world politics in the present book.

I am grateful for the detailed comments, suggestions, and support that I received from numerous individuals who read the manuscript in the spring and summer of 2001: Giovanni Arrighi, John Markoff, Ravi Palat, Leo Panitch, Saskia Sassen, Alvin So, Sidney Tarrow, and Po-Keung Hui. I am also grateful for helpful comments received from the graduate students in

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the spring 2001 seminar on Comparative and World-Historical Sociology at Johns Hopkins University. In response to this feedback, I was able to clarify and develop (and I think significantly improve) the argument at various points in the book. I would also like to thank David Harvey, who suggested the title for the book.

The time span covered by the book is from the late-nineteenth century to the present. Any author who writes a book that deals with the present is faced with a strong temptation to continuously chase after the latest headlines. The first complete draft of the manuscript was finished in March 2001; that is, before September 11, 2001. The book went into production in the spring of 2002; that is, before the major wave of dockworker labor unrest on the West Coast of the United States in the fall of 2002. After September 11, I added a paragraph to Chapter 1 and a footnote to Chapter 5. Yet, while I will likely write more about the relationship between the dynamics of labor unrest and the “war on terrorism” in some other context, September 11 and its aftermath have served to underscore one of the central arguments of this book – that is, the trajectory of workers’ movements is deeply embedded in the dynamics of war and world politics. Likewise, whereas it would be worthwhile to spend some energy on an analysis of the recent conflict on the docks, this event nevertheless has served to underscore another central argument of the book – that is, transportation workers have had, and continue to have, a strategic position within the world capitalist economy and within the world labor movement. No doubt, before this book is in print and read, fresh headlines will provide new temptations to further develop the arguments in this book; but hopefully they will also provide confirmation of the utility of the conceptual frameworks laid out herein for understanding the present and future of labor movements.

This book is dedicated to my parents – Robert and Rose Silver – who always believed that it would turn out well.