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## Schools of Democracy: A Political History of the American Labor Movement

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early retirement programs are important tools that colleges and universities can use to encourage faculty members to relinquish tenure. Steven G. Allen argues that phased retirement programs could be beneficial both for institutions of higher education and for their faculty members. John Pencavel couples a clear general discussion of voluntary early retirement programs with an analysis of one particular such program, at the University of California. Ellen Switkes analyzes phased retirement at the University of California, and John Shoven provides information on the early retirement plans available at Stanford. David Leslie and Natasha Janson report the results of their survey of faculty members at twelve institutions and two state systems regarding the use of phased retirement.

The case studies explored in this book provide useful information for university administrators. Since the book must rely on case studies to evaluate these issues, the book by default highlights the need for data that are comparable across institutions. Michael Baer, Deborah Freund, David Shulenburger, and Richard Spies discuss the need for better data sources and the types of information the surveys should provide so as to help university administrators design policies that will help their institutions maintain a talented faculty. In addition, the authors discuss future research that would help universities make the best decisions regarding employment. In particular, the authors highlight the need to evaluate how different faculty types (tenure-track, non-tenure-track) affect research and teaching. Robert Clark and Madeleine d'Ambrosio summarize the volume in the final chapter and discuss the implications of the research provided in the volume for recruitment, retention, and retirement policies.

Although several chapters in this book should be of interest to a general audience, all the contributions focus on one industry, and much of the book is a presentation of stylized facts aimed at university and college administrators. For that group in particular the book should be of great value. It provides tools and insights for university and college administrators to use when evaluating changes in retirement policy, and it presents valuable information in the form of case studies concerning changes in retention policies and retirement policies.

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## History

*Schools of Democracy: A Political History of the American Labor Movement.* By Clayton Sinyai. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press (an imprint of Cornell University Press), 2006. x, 292 pp. ISBN 0-8014-4455-5, \$55.00 (cloth); 0-8014-7299-7, \$22.50 (paper).

In this ambitious and provocative book, Clayton Sinyai seeks to recover and revitalize a venerable labor tradition: the belief that an informed and active working-class citizenry is integral to ensuring a vital democracy. In both the workplace and the political arenas, he argues, unions at their best have operated as “schools of democracy” that provide workers with a civic education and prepare them for effective participation in the deliberative processes essential to maintaining a democratic polity.

Drawing on the insights of Tocqueville, Jefferson, and Lincoln, Sinyai observes that true participatory democracy demands citizens capable of acting with self-discipline and independence and committed to the principles of group decision-making and majority rule. As America grew more industrial, corporate, and bureaucratic, the prototypes of the virtuous citizen—small farmers and skilled artisans—were reduced to the status of wage labor, and these developments threatened to undermine the personal and political skills necessary for effective civic participation by workers.

In advancing his argument that unions have acted as schools of democracy, Sinyai examines the political thought of important twentieth-century labor leaders and activists. In contrast to most labor historians, he finds the voluntarist philosophy of craft union leaders such as Samuel Gompers and William Green far more compelling than the industrial union approach favored by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and later John L. Lewis. For Sinyai, workers represented by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) craft unions were the moral equivalent of the yeoman farmer or small proprietor whose sturdy independence provided the foundation for Jeffersonian democracy. With their occupational skill and ability to exercise job control, AFL craft unions were able to demonstrate workers' capacity for self-government and follow Samuel Gompers's advice to avoid entangling alliances with the state that could undercut labor's political independence. A most telling example of craft unions' power and virtue was the success of their members in thwarting corporate officials' attempt, through “scientific management,” to gain control over the

shop floor and undermine their independence. Sinyai does acknowledge that Samuel Gompers's vision of democracy did not extend to African Americans, women, and unskilled workers and lacked the visionary, transformational potential promised by the IWW's brand of industrial unionism. However, the ability of AFL craft unionists to combine manual and mental labor, practice self-government, and function with minimal reliance on the state made them archetypal citizens who were uniquely qualified to promote and defend democratic values.

In his consideration of the AFL's 1935 debate over industrial unionism and the founding of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), Sinyai finds much to regret in the outcome of this seminal event. He is sympathetic to AFL president William Green's consternation over the breakaway unions' rejection of majority rule, contending the split signified that "a remarkable exercise in [union] self-rule had come to an end." Echoing an argument forcefully made by legal scholar Christopher Tomlins two decades ago, Sinyai laments that the industrial unions were compelled to sacrifice their institutional and political independence in return for gaining the protections offered by the Wagner Act. He acknowledges that fledgling unions in the nation's mass-production industries needed government support in order to organize unskilled and semi-skilled workers. Yet in becoming "creatures of the state," industrial unions led by men like Sidney Hillman and Walter Reuther had to be far more attentive to the dictates of government and the perceptions of the public than did their voluntaristic and more independent craft brethren. Nonetheless, Sinyai does find that the union shop created by most CIO unions was an environment in which the essential values of solidarity, sacrifice, and majority rule could still be inculcated, and the possibility of preparing workers for industrial citizenship remained viable.

By the post-World War II period, Sinyai notes, the sheer size of political and corporate institutions had rendered Gompers's brand of voluntarism obsolete. Under George Meany's leadership following the merger of the AFL and CIO in 1955, industrial citizenship became more focused on working-class political participation, with both craft and industrial unions playing an active role in electoral politics and pressing to extend the welfare state's benefits to more Americans. The biggest challenge for labor's democratic commitments was posed by the civil rights movement's demands for full social equality. When the movement targeted union hiring practices in the building trades, labor was faced with the "insoluble dilemma" of

reconciling its traditions of "robust local democracy" with the "modern ideals of equality and social justice." Although Sinyai gives Meany's rival Walter Reuther high marks for his more aggressive support for civil rights, he chides Reuther for disaffiliating from the AFL-CIO over key strategic and tactical differences and refusing to abide by majority rule. He does credit both Meany and Reuther for coming together in a massive effort that successfully blunted George Wallace's racial appeals to white workers in 1968 and reflected a major post-World War II achievement in civic education for union members. Sinyai also takes comfort in the member-to-member communication techniques that have characterized labor's recent political participation as a compelling example of civic involvement that contrasts favorably with the quiescence and cynicism afflicting most other segments of the electorate.

As a political history of the American labor movement, *Schools of Democracy* is a rich and often incisive document. Sinyai covers an impressive expanse of labor and political history, and his analyses of union politics, labor law, political action, and American political culture are lucid and perceptive. His nuanced view of Samuel Gompers, William Green, and George Meany is also welcome, especially given the tendency among many labor historians to marginalize or dismiss these AFL leaders.

The book's argument that unions have been schools for democracy, however, is more problematic. There is substantial evidence throughout labor history that majority rule, the *sine qua non* of democracy for Sinyai, can become an instrument for quashing dissent, as was the case when George Meany presided over the AFL-CIO Executive Council's 1961 censure of A. Philip Randolph following his persistent criticism of Meany's leadership on civil rights. By the late 1960s, Meany, whom the author praises for his "scrupulous respect for democratic procedures," advocated limiting the right of rank-and-file union members to vote on proposed contract agreements in the wake of an outpouring of rejected settlements. These actions occurred in a broader context that Sinyai overlooks: the ongoing argument that as a besieged institution, unions could ill afford the dissension and ensuing disunity that often accompanied vigorous internal debate. When the leadership of Gompers, Green, and Meany is more closely scrutinized, it appears as if their emphasis on the procedural trappings of democracy tended to dampen the opportunities for participation and dissent that are essential to the practice of democracy on a substantive basis.

Sinyai's emphasis on procedural democracy also

leads him to neglect more substantive examples of the kinds of civic education that unions have historically offered their members. Indeed, the union movement has a noteworthy record in this regard: the needle trades unions' pioneering programs in workers' education, attempts by industrial unions during the heyday of the CIO to integrate and socialize African-American and immigrant workers into the mainstream of both union and public life, the numerous civic skills workers acquire through involvement in the collective bargaining process, and labor's extensive participation in community and civic activities that allow it to practice deliberative democracy in venues outside the workplace. Unions do have a

strong historical case to make as catalysts for democratic citizenship, but the paucity of examples offered by Sinyai leaves this part of his argument underdeveloped and not fully persuasive.

In spite of these reservations, *Schools of Democracy* offers many valuable insights and provides us with an important reminder: that strong unions and civically engaged workers have invigorated American democracy in the past and may yet again play that important role in the future.

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