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The Revival of Labor Liberalism.

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The Revival of Labor Liberalism. By Andrew Battista. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008. 268 pp. ISBN 978-0-252-03232-5, \$45.00 (cloth).

Andrew Battista, a political scientist at East Tennessee State University, has written a three-act narrative about the shifting relationship between the labor movement in the United States and political liberalism, defined largely as positive state action to guarantee all citizens material sufficiency and to defend consumers and the environment against exploitation and degradation. Act one (Chaps. 1–4) describes the rise and subsequent decline of the labor-liberal alliance from its origins in the Progressive era, through its halcyon years from Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal through Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society, to its collapse in the 1960s when the nation seemed to come apart. Battista has little new to add to the story as told by such scholars as Karen Orren, David Greenstone, Taylor Dark, David Plotke, Nelson Lichtenstein, and Ira Katznelson, all of whom have seen the labor movement and its alliance with the Democratic party as the key to twentieth-century liberalism (Orren most especially) and the deterioration of that alliance in the 1960s as prelude to the rise and dominance of political conservatism. Act two (Chaps. 5–8) represents Battista’s contribution to scholarship. Here he explores the efforts by trade union leaders and their liberal allies to reconstitute the labor-liberal alliance through such institutions as the Progressive Alliance (PA), the Citizen Labor Energy Coalition (CLEC), and the National Labor Committee (NLC). In this section of the book, Battista makes excellent use of the unpublished papers of those organizations as well as personal interviews with union leaders and their liberal allies. This is by far the best and most useful part of the book. Act three (Chaps. 9–10) serves as a coda, treating in relatively brief compass the labor-liberal coalition’s present state and future prospects.

Throughout the book, Battista alludes to a labor-liberal alliance. He believes that neither union leaders nor their liberal allies committed fully to the Democratic party because of the influence exerted within it by its Southern anti-labor, anti-liberal wing. Instead, labor and its liberal allies preferred to remain partly independent of the Democratic party and to ally strategically with its northern Progressive wing. In analyzing relationships between labor liberals and Democrats prior to the 1960s, Battista exaggerates Southern Democratic resistance to labor and social reform. He also over-simplifies unions’ relationship to the alliance. He asserts that CIO unions formed the

core of that alliance and that the building trades unions and metal trades unions that dominated the AFL resisted the labor-liberal alliance. Yet many of the public employee and service workers unions to which Battista ascribes a central role in the original creation and subsequent reconstitution of the labor-liberal alliance were AFL affiliates—notably the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the Communication Workers of America (CWA)—and Dan Tobin, president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, chaired the national Democratic party’s labor committee.

Because of Battista’s affinity for political science models and theories, he simplifies the decline of the alliance during the 1960s. For him the alliance collapsed largely because the labor movement split into Walter Reuther insurgents and George Meany regulars, the former dissenting from AFL hard-line cold-war policies while seeking to cooperate with those Battista labels “new politics” Democrats, and the latter remaining firm Cold Warriors while deriding “new politics” Democrats, in Meany’s words, as “people who looked like Jacks, acted like Jills, and had the odor of Johns about them.” Battista also links the Meany wing of the labor movement to Social Democrats, USA, and the Reuther wing to the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee/Democratic Socialists of America (pp. 62, 75). Such labor-left relationships, however, were epiphenomenal, as neither socialist organization had a membership large enough to form the basis for a potent political coalition. More troubling is Battista’s neglect of the part played by rising racial tensions, urban riots, rising crime rates, and neighborhood decline in turning so many white workers and union members away from the labor-liberal alliance.

Although the four chapters about the revival of the labor-liberal coalition form the heart of the book and contain Battista’s primary contribution to original scholarship, what they explore, ultimately, is failure. The Progressive Alliance, an effort (led by Douglas Fraser of the United Automobile Workers) to build a left-wing ginger group within the Democratic party, was still-born. The Citizen Labor Energy Coalition, created by Machinists’ union president William Wimpisinger in response to the oil shocks of the 1970s, had little to show for its efforts. And the National Labor Committee, formed by critics of the AFL-CIO’s cold-war policies to resist U.S. interventions in Central American civil wars, changed neither AFL-CIO policies nor Reagan administration actions. In its subsequent manifestation as a pressure group to

compel trans-national U.S. corporations to require that their foreign subcontractors implement living wages and better conditions for their employees, the NLC achieved some success.

Battista's analysis of attempts to rebuild a labor-liberal coalition provides considerable new information about the role played by union leaders and their reformer counterparts. It is curiously one-sided, though, in telling the story only from the institutional view. The author fails to explore how ordinary workers responded to these initiatives.

Battista's final two chapters are a conventional treatment of how the election of an insurgent AFL-CIO leadership in 1995 and a schism among those same insurgents a decade later that led unions representing nearly one-third of the federation's membership to secede affected the revival of labor-liberalism. The story remains one more of failure than success. The new leadership of the AFL-CIO failed to reverse the persistent decline in union density or to build a political coalition firm enough to enact labor law reform. Indeed, Battista remains pessimistic about the possibility of reviving a New Deal-style labor-liberal alliance such as the one that collapsed during the 1960s. He sees labor today as the weaker, needier partner to such an alliance, and he concludes that "it is time for liberals ... to do more to support the labor movement and labor law reform. It is in their self-interest to do so, for the future of the labor-liberal Democratic alliance depends on it" (p. 212).

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For All White-Collar Workers: The Possibilities of Radicalism in New York City's Department Store Unions, 1934-1953. By Daniel Opler. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007. 270 pp. ISBN 978-0-8142-1063-5, \$49.95 (cloth); 978-0-8142-9141-2, \$9.95 (CD).

Daniel Opler takes up a crucial missing piece in U.S. labor history: retail clerks' organizing in New York City during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. As he makes clear, the labor movement's failure to successfully build a base of unionized retail workers in this classic boom period of the CIO would prove devastating in the late twentieth century and into the present, as Wal-Mart and its lesser incarnations flourish almost entirely non-union. The retail workers' union is also the last missing

piece in our understanding of the larger Communist-led unions. More locally, it is the antecedent of District 65, the quirky, quasi-independent union of store and warehouse workers that would play a crucial role in the New York labor movement of the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond.

As Opler lays out the story with a crisp ability to clarify convoluted splits, mergers, and internal politics, Communists first started leading smaller strikes of workers around Union Square during 1934 and 1935. By 1936 and 1937 they were able to pull off successful strikes at more upscale stores in midtown, using a savvy combination of public shaming, sit-downs, and mayoral intervention. But their parent union by this point, the Retail Clerks International Protective Union (RCIPA), was mired in corrupt endorsements of company unions and was none too enthusiastic about Left militancy in New York. In 1937 Samuel Wolchak, the New Yorkers' non-Communist leader, broke the local away from the RCIPA, pulled it into the CIO-affiliated Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU), and soon positioned himself as a classic broker, offering department store managers relative labor peace in return for decent contracts, while simultaneously cooperating with Communist leaders who chomped at the bit, pushing for more militant strikes and community-based strategies. Opler nicely demonstrates the broader resources the Communist Party drew on in the 1930s, from May Day parades to pro-labor musicals to endless speeches and demonstrations in Union Square and other public spaces, all helping publicize—and politicize—department store workers' struggles. By 1945 the RWDSU had emerged as a major force in New York's retail landscape, if tamed by its fealty to the wartime no-strike pledge.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, anti-communism swiftly laid waste to those gains. Local Communist leaders initially wiggled out of signing Taft-Hartley's affidavits and in 1948 established independence from the RWDSU as District 65. In a now-classic narrative, though, the combination of federal power, labor's own anti-communism, and management hostility proved too overpowering in the new postwar context. Equally important, department store managers rapidly restructured in the face of all this union power, shifting to self-service and skipping off to the suburbs—where employees, Opler claims, were less likely to self-identify as workers. Constant layoffs ensued, along with an ever-present and very real threat to close down any store that unionized or pushed for a better contract. By 1953, when Opler ends his story, District 65 still held on to its unionized stores, but had lost its