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For All White-Collar Workers: The Possibilities of Radicalism in New York City's Department Store Unions, 1934-1953.

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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

chance to spearhead a broad white-collar labor movement beyond New York City.

Opler's study certainly devastates any vestigial myths that private-sector white-collar workers cannot be organized, if given the right combination of militancy, strategic alliances, and governmental context. He adds some intriguing, if largely unsubstantiated arguments to our larger debates about whether white-collar workers consider themselves "workers." Opler also demonstrates, as have others, the Communists' effectiveness at strategically targeting workplaces and drawing on their considerable citywide resources to organize.

To fully flesh out the story, we do still need a stronger basic sense of department store workers themselves: who they were, demographically, on a more concrete level; the union's total membership and how it changed over time; and, most important, what those workers were thinking about all this organizing and what their exact role was in the union. Opler could then develop his central arguments more deeply, such as his analysis of gender. He praises the Communist organizers' commitment to organizing in a white-collar sector where most workers were female—in contrast to the CIO's glorification of male factory workers—while noting the retail unions' worsening failure to incorporate women in the leadership. To get a feel for what was really going on inside the union, though, including its gender dynamics, we need a sense of the role of the members (male and female) in all this, and how they changed over time. Opler unfortunately also falls into the trap of ascribing a gender to women only; the men, here, are gender-neutral "leaders" or "Communists." As a result, it is unclear in his narrative when and if the leaders and Communists involved were all-male or only mostly male. Equally important, in Opler's account, no men exercise agency in excluding, dismissing, or marginalizing women; rather, men appear as gender-neutral union activists or Communists, who collectively, without a gender, do not incorporate women in the leadership. Women, by contrast, are named as women and then added into the story—despite their overwhelming *majority* status in the industry.

The book would have been strengthened, similarly, by a more sophisticated and committed analysis of race. The workers, Communists, and union leaders in the book are all implicitly white but rarely named as such. Again, white workers' and union leaders' lack of interest in fighting racial discrimination as a result appears somehow natural, or race-neutral. I wish we had an analysis here of the racial politics of the Party, too, especially given the rich literature on New York Communism in this period, as well as on

race, labor, and white racism. African American, Puerto Rican, and white workers alike seem to lack presence or agency in fighting, enduring, countenancing, or advocating racism. Especially given District 65's major role in the Civil Rights Movement a few years later, it is unfortunate that we do not get a fuller sense here of the union's racial prehistory.

A more thorough mastery and use of the secondary literature would have helped Opler develop a fuller analysis on these and other fronts, including his central topic, the CP. Opler praises the Communists' militancy, their ability to draw on allies, and their willingness to confront the government, management, and the press. A more nuanced knowledge of the Party would have helped him assess the Communists' weaknesses and strengths, alike—how the Party line that could deliver militancy during the 1930s, for example, could take it away just as swiftly during the war, during the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the Party's adherence to the no-strike pledge; or how male or white Party leaders might talk about supporting women or people of color in the leadership, but then only go so far in allowing it. Both the militancy *and* the brakes on it are inseparable parts of the same package. The book would also have been stronger had developments clearly tied to exact Communist history, such as the Party's postwar commitment to racial equality of a particular sort, been grounded in specific CP history rather than subsumed into a generic celebratory "radicalism."

We can be grateful to Opler, then, for highlighting this all-important example of successful white-collar organizing, and for underscoring so clearly the devastating effects of postwar anti-communism on unionizing in white-collar employment, as well as in manufacturing. We have the basic narrative clear, here, as well, of the complex leadership shifts within the department store unions, as well as the consequences of those shifts. Now we can put that together with the other, parallel stories of Left-led unions in this era to analyze larger patterns. We can also put Opler's narrative together with the less romantic tale of organizing by more conservative retail clerks during this period, which produced the other four-fifths of the RCIPA's members in the rest of the country. Finally, with rank-and-file workers added to the story, we will be able to see more clearly the lessons we can learn about effective organizing of white-collar workers today—and put them into practice.

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