[Review of the Book The CIO, 1935-1955]

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Abstract

Excerpt] Labor's upsurge in the 1930s remains for many even in our own time a source of inspiration and uplift. Those who are romantically inclined have long cherished the image of union militancy that attaches to that decade, a militancy that many have longed to see revived in recent years. Some contemporary union activists and their supporters, with more than a touch of a similar romanticism, frequently promote the claim that as the anti-union 1920s preceded the 1930s militancy, so too would the anti-union Reagan years give way to rekindled worker activism. Scholars as well have been influenced by this central image of progressive and mobilized "labor on the march" (the phrase with which Edward Levinson entitled his 1938 book). Many an important history has explored aspects of those struggles with insight, even if most writing in this vein must ultimately stress a militancy betrayed, opportunities lost, or working-class interests smothered by opportunistic labor leaders, vicious employers, and government bureaucrats alike.

It is a testimony to the power of this symbol that six decades after the founding of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)-the premier labor institution established during the 1930s to foster industrial unionism-it still retains significant appeal. Yet few have subjected it to a searching analysis. Melvyn Dubofsky's 1979 article (in the journal Amerikastudien), with its provocative evocation of the "not so turbulent Thirties," was, until recently, the exception. Nor has any historian attempted to understand the whole of the CIO's institutional life, from its inception in those "glory years" down through its merger with its erstwhile implacable foe, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), in 1955. To write such a broad history is the task Robert H. Zieger undertakes in this book. Although there are grounds for disagreement and debate, Zieger has written a book of serious scholarship, based on a career-long immersion in archival and secondary sources, a book, moreover, that is replete with new insights, sound judgments, and a solid interpretative framework. It will serve as the standard interpretation for decades to come.

Keywords
labor movement, labor history, union organizing, Congress of Industrial Organizations, CIO

Disciplines
Labor History | Labor Relations | Unions

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Suggested Citation

Required Publisher Statement
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the opportunity to roll back union gains, inducing a drop in UAW membership. The Unity Group appealed to John L. Lewis and Philip Murray for help in containing Martin's abuse of power. With their aid, Martin was forced to resign, taking his supporters back into the AFL.

For Kraus, the ouster of Martin and his allies was a hollow victory. At the convention that followed, he complains, the militant left “allowed” the pure-and-simple trade unionists to dominate the leadership. The book therefore finishes on a sour note. It seems to me that to blame the CIO for the new UAW leadership is disingenuous, however, since at least Martin had been forced out.

The perspective of Kraus’s account, that of witness, has both strengths and weaknesses. Its most serious failing, perhaps, is the over-simplification to which it is liable: there are few gray areas, and the reader is often taken down an infighter’s road where the protagonists are either simply good or simply bad. Kraus often condemns an individual or group as reactionary, but the only definition of “reactionary” one could draw from the book is little more specific than “destructive.” The explanation of the infighting, although useful, at times comes across as a dry monologue. The style is that of the old labor history, full of eye-glazing details about the institutional doings of a few prominent individuals. This methodology consigns the workers to the background; they emerge briefly only after the policy or strategy under discussion has been formulated by the contentious leadership.

Surprisingly, considering the revolution in the federal government in the 1930s, Kraus gives short shrift to Roosevelt and most of the New Deal innovations. As has been highlighted elsewhere, the New Deal established an atmosphere that nurtured trade union growth, especially following Roosevelt’s alliance with the CIO after the 1936 election. The resultant sense of union empowerment is absent from Kraus’s account.

Notwithstanding its shortcomings, however, Heroes of Unwritten Story is an informative and stimulating book. The lack of historical context is due mainly to Kraus’s intentions and background. He is a journalist telling a story, but he was also a critical participant in the bloody internal battles of the fledgling UAW. The reader is left with a clear impression of the major players involved, and also of the lesser players who emerged from the locals to challenge the awesome power of the auto companies. Although he leans toward an institutional appraisal, Kraus still provides abundant examples of how individuals and chance encounters can leverage major historical events. Just as important, Kraus’s direct observations offer unique insight into the creation of a union that became a dominant presence in American industrial relations. As Kraus points out, although he did not work inside the auto plant, “I was as much a part of it as anybody else who did.”

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Because of the importance of this history, the Associate Editor asked Professor Salvatore to prepare an especially thorough review.
Robert H. Zieger undertakes in this book. Although there are grounds for disagreement and debate, Zieger has written a book of serious scholarship, based on a career-long immersion in archival and secondary sources, a book, moreover, that is replete with new insights, sound judgments, and a solid interpretative framework. It will serve as the standard interpretation for decades to come.

A professor of history at the University of Florida, Zieger is the author of numerous books and articles about American working people in the twentieth century. As in much of his earlier work, this new book reflects a sensitivity to the social and cultural dimensions of working people’s lives; but also like that earlier work, it primarily examines the CIO as an institution. Rather than the juggernaut of heroic memory, Zieger found, amid the acknowledged spurts of militancy, an industrial union movement and institution that were “in reality fragile and uncertain.” The CIO’s greatest strength, he writes, came not in the 1930s but in the context of an intimate and largely dependent relationship with the federal government during wartime; and, Zieger judges, the majority of the CIO’s leaders and members (from 1.8 million to 3.9 million) despite the withdrawal of more than 600,000 miners from the CIO.

A second theme concerns race. In general, Zieger finds the CIO record “positive but prob-
lematic” during these decades (160). Early on, CIO leaders were very conscious of the importance of organizing black workers, he writes, but sought to minimize attention to racial matters. Before and during World War II, white workers often conducted “hate strikes” against the presence or upgrading of black workers in the plant or as members of the union. CIO leaders used the power of federal agencies to discipline whites and they proclaimed their institutional commitments to racial justice. Yet within the union movement itself the expectation persisted that the economic improvements unionization promised would themselves, somewhat magically, eliminate racism among white members. These attitudes bound the CIO’s efforts in the postwar South as well. Wary of stirring up white racial anger or of challenging entrenched, anti-union white Democratic officials, the major organizing drive, nicknamed “Operation Dixie,” was flawed from the start, as black workers were relegated to minor roles.

Zieger is quite perceptive about the critical importance of race throughout the CIO’s independent existence, yet his criticism does not prevent him from recognizing how a growing conservative political climate after the 1946 strike wave would have largely limited CIO leaders even had they more aggressively pursued this issue.

The third theme concerns the role of the American left, primarily the Communist Party, in the CIO. Like many before him, Zieger acknowledges the important contributions Communists made in organizing the CIO, even as he notes the unease their presence created among many non-Communist unionists as early as 1936 and 1937. That unease continued, occasionally breaking into the open—as in the 1946 United Auto Workers election, which saw the anti-Communist Walter Reuther elected to the presidency of the union—until the irrevocable break in 1949, when eleven unions, with almost one million members, were expelled from the CIO.

Zieger is of two minds about the Communists. As unionists, he finds them generally as good as any others, and specifically rejects the charge that they put Soviet interests ahead of immediate trade union concerns. But he also argues that to claim, as many CIO communists did, that their political affiliation was the equivalent of another CIO member’s Democratic party partisanship was fallacious and misleading. Zieger’s analysis of the expulsion is quite clear: given the influence of Soviet interests on CIO Communists, especially concerning major domestic and international policy, the CIO had no choice but to expel Communist members.

Finally, Zieger’s analysis of the complex character of the men and women who comprised the CIO’s rank and file is quite suggestive. His use of polling data, flawed as the data may at times be, is inventive, and it allows him to peer more deeply into day-to-day worker reality. As sharply as they resented employer exploitation, working people, including CIO members, largely supported the nation’s business-driven economy and thought union leaders possessed too much power, and they overwhelmingly supported sanctions against Communists in the union. In 1947, almost 40% of workers polled expressed support for the Taft-Hartley Act. Even as the very real economic gains they won threatened to separate CIO members “from the rest of the working class,” they in turn experienced an increasing distance from the far more liberal political positions of their CIO leaders and staff members (327). Zieger’s understanding of the multiple, contrasting currents that flowed through the CIO’s rank and file is an important contribution, even if his institutional emphasis prevents him from exploring these points in greater depth.

Along with Steven Fraser’s biography of Sidney Hillman and David Halle’s study of male American workers’ attitudes in the 1970s, Robert Zieger’s fine book provides us with an essential foundation for understanding the modern labor movement, its institutions and its rank and file. That he can accomplish this with a sympathy that is evident yet realistic and unromantic shows him to be a historian of skill and sensitivity who values his craft highly. We his readers are the beneficiaries of that commitment.

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