

The Right and Labor in America: Labor Historians' Perspective

The Right and Labor in America in Retrospective: Remarks

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My co-editor, Nelson Lichtenstein, and I were honored that Professor Michael Hillard put together a symposium, *The Right and Labor in America: Politics, Ideology, and Imagination*. It is exciting to know that this collection is being read and taken seriously because, at various points, we were unsure this project would see the light of day. This collection's backstory is important because it illustrates the book's central point: the history of the American labor movement cannot be separated from the trajectory of U.S. conservatism because the Right's rise depended on its concerted assaults on trade unionism.

This anthology grew out of a conference, *The American Right and U.S. Labor: Politics, Ideology, and Imagination*, held at UCSB's Center for the Study of Work, Labor, and Democracy. Nelson founded the center shortly after leaving the University of Virginia, where he had established himself as a leading expert on the postwar labor movement's rise and decline. I served as his first assistant director. Together we decided to hold a forum on American unionism and conservatism on January 16 and 17, 2009, in the hope that our East Coast colleagues would be relieved to come to California's central coast the weekend before Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

We could not have picked a better date for a conference that took roughly a year to plan. Just three days later, Barack Obama was sworn into office. Somehow we overlooked this fact during the initial planning. The timing was perfect because everyone's mind was on EFCA—the Employee Free Choice Act—an issue that Obama, even as a centrist Democrat, had endorsed during his presidential campaign.

When I say everyone, I mean everyone. We had a motley crew of about 75 assembled for a jam-packed schedule. Historians, sociologists, political scientists, policy experts, labor lawyers had all flown in or drove down for this two-day symposium. Union organizers from California and New York also attended, as did Chris Tilly, the head of UCLA's Institute for Research on Labor and Employment; and Sanford Jacoby, an economist from UCLA's Anderson School of Management. We even had quite a few undergraduates (mostly UCSB labor studies minors) in attendance.

Nelson and I had hoped to attract more labor historians but were hardly surprised that we had not. Labor history has largely focused on shop-floor issues and the social history of America's working classes. The few experts interested in trade union politics are usually focused on labor's importance to the Democratic Party and the ways in which liberals have ignored unionists after Election Day. Many also still consider labor and management to have been at peace in the decades after World War II.

Nelson and I wanted this project to shake up the field of labor history and align this subdiscipline with new work on the history of American capitalism and American conservatism. We envisioned the conference as a magnet for all the disparate work that highlighted the importance of a broad "labor question" to the rise of the American Right, then the hottest topic in American history but one largely ignored by labor historians. True, a few scholars have looked at blue-collar support for Republicans (like the infamous Reagan Democrats), and many researchers have concluded their stories of working-class triumphs with laments that

these victories proved Pyrrhic in the long run. Nelson and I wanted to show that such well-known stories were a part of a larger, generally untold, history of conservatism's changing character and rhetorical legitimacy over the course of the twentieth century. As such, we endeavored to jettison the long-held presumption that there had ever been a labor-management accord and prove that the very idea of unionism had been critical to the reshaping of the American workplace and the country's politics.

We brought together panelists whose combined research challenged standard accounts of America in the twentieth century. Otterbein College's Anthony DeStefanis showed that the anti-unionism of soldier strikebreakers played an outsized role in the 1914 Ludlow Massacre. Jonathan Rees proclaimed that John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s interwar anti-unionism may have been liberal, but it was still a detriment to shop-floor relations. And Kyle Bruce and Chris Nyland completely reconsidered the fate of Taylorite Scientific Managers, finding that its demonization was unwarranted, especially when compared with the far more influential management ethos developed and deployed by devotees to Elton Mayo and his brand of human relations.

The conference also included a wholesale reconsideration of the New Deal and its fate. Chris Nehls showed that the American Legion disdained striking workers, whose protests Legionnaires considered a form of disloyalty in a time of economic crisis. The very notion of free trade was also being reworked during the 1930s. Andrew Wender Cohen argued that New Deal-era free trade policies had been linked to labor protections at home—this was one a sort of compact that allowed labor to endorse such internationalism—but that bargain would fall apart during the era of conservative ascendance and globalized trade that began in the 1970s when American workers lost social guarantees and federal protections and faced a form of free trade that drove wages down and lured production overseas. Noted historian Kim Phillips-Fein likewise probed the power and potency of those businessmen supportive of free markets but which were also opposed to regulations, state pensions, and unions during and after the New Deal. She concluded that their managerial hostility proved there had never been a truly liberal consensus. Well-known capital mobility expert Jefferson Cowie went even farther than that: he gave a preview of a controversial essay, “The Long Exception,” which he and Nick Salvatore published in a 2009 issue of *International Labor and Working-Class History*. They argued that the New Deal was exactly that—a long exception, both in politics and culture, to America's longstanding conservative tradition, particularly when it came to national support for organized labor.

The two-day inquiry into longstanding labor-management antagonism, both on the job and in the voting booth, would not have been complete without discussing where such conflicts occurred. The anti-union South stood out for some scholars. Jennifer Brooks showed Georgia to be a haven for returning reactionary GIs, and Michael Honey emphasized anti-unionism as a critical facet in the crusade against Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern labor movement, which, Michael Pierce cautioned, had once had a friend in Arkansas governor Orval Faubus until unionism became associated with the advancement of civil rights in his state. Yet other presenters emphasized that the seemingly liberal states on the West Coast and in the upper Midwest were hardly the bastion of labor-liberalism that many scholars assumed. Reuel Schiller described how the 1958 right-to-work campaign divided Californians. Lizzie Lamoree noted that California Grape Growers may have hated Cesar Chavez, but they effectively learned how to use agricultural labor law reform to their advantage. So, too, the economic conservatives that Todd Holmes demonstrated to be the force behind Ronald Reagan's gubernatorial campaign. Other researchers emphasized that labor was equally embattled in the east, as Lisa Phillips showed in her study of failed fair employment practices legislation. Alex Gourse proved that state-level FEPC legislation hardly represented a true victory for labor. Illinois business owners instead made use of the courts and effectively turned a legislative victory into a series of court battles that weakened fair employment protections.

Attendees also emphasized that rhetorical attacks on labor were important to conservatism's twentieth-century successes. Central to business arguments against organized labor in the postwar period was the charge of racketeering, a phrase once used to describe mob corruption but increasingly deployed, as David Witwer, Joe McCartin, and Jean-Cristian Vinel; Sophia Lee; and Larry Richards noted, by critics of unionism against legal rights and federal policy. Shannon Clark explained that the language of racketeering shaped the Right's arguments against white-collar unionism, whereas Judith Stein found this language pivotal to the collapse of

federal labor law reform in 1978. The specter of corruption also played an outsized role in how right-to-work laws became investment incentives central to economic development, whether in the Southwestern states that I studied, in the Southern states that Tami Friedman researched, or the rusting Steel Belt communities that Jeff Manuel explored.

The most electrifying session was the final one on Saturday afternoon, usually when everyone is tired and just ready to go home. We were instead primed for a panel titled How to Think About the Employee Free Choice Act. The discussions did not disappoint. How could they? Presenters included San Francisco State University's Labor Center Director John Logan, Irvine Law Professor Catherine Fisk, Oregon Labor Education and Research Center faculty member Gordon Lafer, and SUNY Brockport political scientist Susan Orr. The general discussion, as noted in the volume's introduction, assumed that EFCA would have a difficult time in Congress. The Q&A hence devolved into a spirited debate about what academics and activists could do to ensure that EFCA would pass and then secure effective enforcement. Nevertheless, the expectation that a new day had arrived when it came to EFCA and other Obama administration social reforms helped conferees end the conference on a buoyant note, as reported by the Labor and Working-Class History Association in its 2009 newsletter.

Given the nature of our research, all of us should have known better. Business had never willingly abdicated its power, prestige, and legitimacy during the twentieth century; why would it do so in the twenty-first? Republicans and corporate executives began assailing EFCA even before Congress reconvened. In the face of these assaults, Democrats once again abandoned the chief legislative initiatives advocated by the labor movement. Obama and the Democrats therefore failed, despite a moment in which they enjoyed supermajorities in Congress, to extend unemployment benefits to the long-term unemployed, to pass a robust stimulus, or to include a public option in the Affordable Care Act (popularly known as ObamaCare). All of these issues, to be sure, affect working families—the phrase now *en vogue* when describing the American working class. Yet few pundits discussed power, workplace rights, or democracy.

As conference organizers, Nelson and I should have been the least surprised by this turn of events. We almost had to cancel the conference months before because then-governor Arnold Schwarzenegger had exercised his line item veto power and slashed University of California funds for the Labor and Employment Research Fund (LERF), the pot of money that supported our center and its programming. Schwarzenegger targeted LERF because conservatives rightly understood that the campus-based labor centers at Berkeley, UCLA, and elsewhere were vital to the health of California's relatively robust union movement. So UC's labor studies funding, a minuscule budget item in the overall budget, became a high-profile political football between California Democrats and their Republican governor, at least until the financial crisis of 2008–2009, which permanently cut such funds.

In 2010, we sent the University of Pennsylvania Press a manuscript with 14 papers organized under four subheadings: The Conservative Search for Social Harmony; Region, Race, and Resistance to Organized Labor; Appropriating the Language of Civil Rights; The Specter of Union Power and Corruption. Like the 2009 symposium, this volume sought to retell both the history of American trade unionism and American conservatism over the course of the twentieth century. But with EFCA dead and the labor movement in eclipse, our publisher did not think the book would generate much interest. But when in the winter and spring of 2011, conservative governors such as Scott Walker and John Kasich pushed through Midwest statehouses a wave of anti-labor legislation, sometimes generating massive protest movements in response, we all knew that the subject of this volume was far more timely than we could have once imagined. Our editor not only rushed the manuscript into production but even put Wisconsin governor Scott Walker on the cover.