

University of Massachusetts Amherst
ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst

Economics Department Faculty Publications Series

Economics

2007

Labor's Home Front: The American federation of labor during World War II

Gerald Friedman

University of Massachusetts - Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/econ_faculty_pubs



Part of the [Labor Economics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Friedman, Gerald, "Labor's Home Front: The American federation of labor during World War II" (2007). *Journal of Economic History*. 140.

Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umass.edu/econ_faculty_pubs/140

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Economics at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Economics Department Faculty Publications Series by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Labor's Home Front: The American Federation of Labor during World War II. By Andrew Kersten. New York: New York University Press, 2006. Pp. xiii, 273. \$42.

It may be that novelty and revolution attract historians more than do the common tales of stability and gradual change. If so, our understanding of the past will remain sadly truncated because history rarely moves in leaps and established institutions shape our present and all of our futures. The past, as Faulkner said, "is not dead; it is not even past."

So it was in those dramatic days when the modern American state and our modern labor movement were created in the cauldron of World War II. Historians have focused their attention on Sidney Hillman, the Reuther brothers, and the legion of newly organized members of radical industrial unions in the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Based on Google-hits and library references, roughly twice as much has been written about the CIO and World War II than about its older union rival, the American Federation of Labor (AFL). This focus on the CIO includes some of the finest works of American labor history, such as Nelson Lichtenstein's *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II*. By design, a focus on the CIO restricts these studies to the smaller part of the American labor movement. The CIO never enrolled more than a third of American union members, and usually had less than half the membership of the older AFL. Furthermore, the gap between the organizations grew during World War II when the AFL enrolled over 2.5 million new members to the CIO's gain of under 1.8 million. The AFL appears staid and boring compared with the drama of the CIO with its ongoing battles over rank-and-file democracy and communism versus social democracy. But it was the larger AFL that would determine the future of the

American labor movement. More than the CIO, the AFL was at the center of this New Deal coalition. Sometimes, it behooves historians to study the powerful.

By putting the AFL at the center of wartime labor relations, Andrew Kersten begins to correct the historical record. He shows how the AFL moved at least part-way, from being a loose alliance of narrow and exclusive trade unions to representing the broader American working class in a struggle to fulfill the promise of Roosevelt's Four Freedoms. Yet, balanced and fair-minded, including failures as well as achievements, *Labor's Home Front* shows the limits of the AFL's transformation, limits that contributed to the eventual failure of the New Deal Coalition and the collapse of the American labor movement.

Kersten chronicles the AFL's transition from pure-and-simple voluntarism to broader social unionism. He begins with the AFL's campaign for higher wages and "equality of sacrifice" (chapter 1), moves through defensive efforts by the AFL against employer attacks (chapter 2), to its grudging acceptance of African-American and women workers (chapters 3 and 4), its continued rivalry with the CIO (chapter 5), and campaigns for occupational safety (chapter 6). The book then culminates in the AFL's campaign for postwar planning and reform (chapter 7). Each chapter shows the continued balance in the AFL between its traditional commitment to an exclusive unionism seeking to preserve gains for its own membership and a broader labor movement. What Kersten labels "the Fight against the Open Shop" in chapter 2, for example, was not only a fight to protect unions from free riding by nonmembers and to protect union activists and members from employer discrimination, but it was also part of a broader struggle to preserve the AFL's own monopoly of representation in many workplaces and its ability to organize by making deals with employers to keep out CIO unions. The AFL moved, but only incrementally, from its past exclusivism and narrow pure-and-simple unionism. In the chapters on race and gender, he shows how AFL unions such as the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers moved only slightly and begrudgingly from their traditional racism and misogyny. More often, the AFL used its position with the federal government to stall "wartime efforts to end job bias against African Americans" (p. 76) and to ensure that women workers would remain only an industrial reserve to be dismissed at the end of the war crisis. Scorning appeals from President Roosevelt himself, the AFL refused any war-time compromise with the CIO. Denying the need for a united labor movement, and putting union gains at risk, AFL leaders used the war to advance their position against the CIO and their own rank-and-file.

Only in the area of post-war planning does Kersten find a major change in AFL policy. He shows how the AFL "signed on wholesale to the notion of full employment" to be achieved through federal government action (p. 210). Working with congressional liberals and the Roosevelt Administration, the AFL endorsed an American Beveridge Plan to expand social security system, establish universal health insurance, and to guarantee full employment through massive Federal public works spending. Abandoning a half-century commitment to voluntarism and pure-and-simple unionism, the AFL campaigned for national planning and active federal spending policies to find "the way to freedom from want" (p. 213).

The failures of the 1920s and the crisis of the Great Depression taught the AFL's leaders that unions needed active state support to overcome employer opposition and to survive the vicissitudes of the market economy. But if the AFL came to join a New Deal Coalition, Kersten shows that it had not fully absorbed the meaning of coalition politics. A federation of exclusive trade unions committed to pure-and-

simple goals could ignore broader social issues, disdain rank-and-file democracy and popular militancy, and even indulge its traditional racism and misogyny. But such narrowness would preclude the broad working-class politics needed to build and sustain a coalition for broad social transformation.

Andrew Kersten has written a short book on a large topic. But if he has barely begun an important discussion, he has opened it well and his work should spark much discussion, and encourage many to build on his important work.

GERALD FRIEDMAN, *University of Massachusetts at Amherst*