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Edmund F. Wehrle

Eastern Illinois University, efwehrle@eiu.edu

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Foreign Affairs! That's for People Who Don't Have to Work to Make a Living

Edmund F. Wehrle

Kudos to the editors for this special issue exploring the intersections between labor and diplomatic history. Diplomatic historians long have urged expanding their field beyond the narrow confines of elite decision makers. This roundtable, responding to that mandate, offers yet more evidence of a thriving field, embracing new subject matters and approaches—and emerging richer for the exercise.

U.S. labor history, in my analysis, could benefit from a similar reawakening. A sense of drift, perhaps accompanying the general decline of trade unions, recently has shadowed the field. Of course, this was not always the case. Inspired by the imaginative work of E. P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman, labor history thrived in the 1970s and 1980s. Pioneering scholars countered the dominant narrative with remarkable, “forgotten” histories of worker activism and class consciousness. Meticulous local studies revealed a genuine grassroots challenge to dominant capitalist values. Yet such radicalism, these studies suggested, inevitably proved ephemeral, quickly undermined by one of several corroding forces: recalcitrant capitalists, an oppositional state, sudden economic downturns—or quite often divisions among workers themselves. “Lost moment” monographs piled up, while labor historians strove to produce a synthesis—with limited success.

By the 1990s, these romantically inclined historians met a stiff challenge. With the worldwide trend toward economic liberalization, their work seemed less relevant. Meanwhile, a group led by David Roediger began rewriting labor history aiming to expose structures of “whiteness” at the core of the working-class experience; racism not radicalism defined American workers, they submitted. Today, labor historians are struggling to regain their footing. Many have moved to further examine the junctions between race and class. Others, commendably, are exploring the influence of labor on international issues.

This forum suggests much about both the potential and potential hazards as labor historians move to investigate international relations. A prime weakness of labor history has been a tendency to portray workers as labor historians would want them—as militant anticapitalists. As this roundtable demonstrates, working-class radicalism existed. Its extent and influence, however, remains debatable.

Echoing arguments first set out in her 1995 book, Beth McKillen posits that “decentering the narrative”—introducing the perspectives of “critical working-class actors”—reveals broad, radical resistance to Wilsonian internationalism during the World War I era. Wilson hoped the International Labor Organization, forged in large measure by his loyal ally American Federation of Labor (AFL) President Samuel Gompers, would provide the stabilizing labor component in his broader global

vision. Like Wilson, Gompers subscribed to a decidedly American version of international cooperation, privileging “voluntary” trade unions and free enterprise. Both Gompers and Wilson, however, would soon be shocked by the determined “grassroots opposition” they encountered.

The precise nature of this resistance will be the sticking point for many readers. McKillen urges that we appreciate “the sheer diversity of working-class experiences and perspectives.” Yet she focuses primarily on socialist opposition, including Industrial Workers of the World militants and Mexican-American anarchists. McKillen also cites wartime strike activity and draft resistance as evidence of wide radically inclined dissent. We are advised of the “value of chasing slackers and draft resisters down the back alleys of Chicago and the backroads of the rural South.” This is all fine and good. But clearly a myriad of motivations lay behind draft dodging and wartime labor unrest. White workers, well versed in Jim Crow racism, frequently refused to toil alongside black migrants, sparking many strikes. Draft resistance, likewise, is too complex for quick generalizations. While one doubts that “most draft-age men tried to avoid conscription,” those who did, undoubtedly, were responding to varying and deeply personal (often religious) motivations. Wilsonian rhetoric failed to impress resisters, but this hardly automatically puts them in league with radical socialists.

Socialists, anarchists, and radicals deserve our attention (and have received more than their share). But my sense is that more particularistic concerns occupied most workers. Perennial economic challenges demanded careful, often conservative planning. A general distaste for concentrated power probably led many toward isolationism and suspicion of both Wilson and his determined opponents. Simultaneously, I do not doubt that many workers were swept up, briefly at least, in the “Wilsonian moment.” Michael Kazin’s admonition remains germane: “Labor scholars have not ... come to grips with the abundant evidence that white wage-earners found more to celebrate than to curse in the achievements of a liberal state and civil society which their own efforts did so much to develop and improve.”¹

If the First World War mobilized workers to embrace far-reaching alternatives to American foreign policy, World War II fostered similar pregnant moments, according to Daniel Garcia and Geert Van Goethem. Based on his study of five thousand GI “gripes” to the editor, Garcia sees an intense class consciousness leading to a virtual mutiny among rank-and-file military in 1945. While it is exciting to hear the dissident voices cited by the author, his piece yields few concrete conclusions (Garcia himself is at pains to describe his work as “a point of departure” and inconclusive).

Without question, war and military life had exhausted American GIs by 1945—as is abundantly clear from the gripes. A number of grippers adopted radical critiques of U.S. foreign policy. Were these views representative? We have no way of knowing (by definition, we are hearing only the most passionate and angry voices). Garcia refers to “many GIs” fourteen times over the course of his study. Real numbers,

however, remain elusive. Similar evidentiary problems surface throughout the piece. Arguing the military “mutiny was, to a large degree, influenced by a strike wave led by the United Auto Workers,” Garcia offers only one piece of evidence: a colonel who admonished malcontents “you’re not working for General Motors.”

From the evidence presented, I sense that isolationism and traditional American skepticism of authority rather than radicalism and class consciousness appear at the core of GI gripes. Garcia himself presents isolationist Senator Robert Taft as “[e]choing what many GIs were feeling” by linking commercialism to postwar U.S. ambitions.

Geert Van Goethem sees similar forces emanating from World War II. Van Goethem—the only featured author offering an international, multiarchival study—argues that bitter disputes between the AFL and the British Trade Union Council scuttled prospects for labor to shape meaningful postwar planning. Soviet participation in international labor alliances, adamantly resisted by the AFL, proved the fatal sticking point. Again we encounter a lost moment, rich with potential, but ultimately doomed. In fact, more was in play, I would suggest, than mere AFL recalcitrance. Whatever the immediate circumstances, sooner or later the larger ideological divide between East and West would have obstructed any moves toward international labor cooperation. Van Goethem’s article does make clear one often overlooked issue: sharp divisions existed in the early 1940s between the AFL, eager to start its own Cold War, and the U.S. government, determined to promote international labor cooperation. Labor and state, Van Goethem insists, both supported a “determined interventionism,” but he cannot paper over fundamental labor-state tensions during the war years.

Ben Sears, however, rejects any notion of daylight between U.S. labor leaders and U.S. state. Instead he sees a “tacit agreement between the foreign policy apparatus and the CIO (and the AFL as well)” brokered by “perceptive business leaders [who] saw opportunity and proposed to enlist the nation’s newly influential labor movement as a supporter of their foreign policy agenda.” Sears is hardly alone in subscribing to this “sell-out” thesis. But the AFL (as Van Goethem makes clear) and rising elements within the Congress of Industrial Organizations, for their own involved reasons, were already rabidly anti-Stalinist from the early 1940s (some earlier) and clashing with the State Department and White House as a result. If anything, the postwar U.S. government came to adopt labor’s foreign policy outlook—not the other way around.

For balance, Sears (and Van Goethem) might have explained the key principle driving American labor’s resistance to Soviet accommodation: the conviction that state-run “unions” behind the iron curtain were frauds, dishonest representations of workers’ interests. One might expect Sears, who sharply chides American labor for its subjugation to the state, to recognize, at least in passing, the problematic nature of “unions” explicitly dominated by their governments.

Sears concludes with the triumph of a “grass roots” movement among workers to challenge U.S. policy in Iraq. No doubt his piece will resonate with many politically inclined labor historians. Others, however, might see presentism and an undue focus on assigning blame rather than exploring and explaining all perspectives.

In the late 1940s, a blue-collar worker famously dismissed foreign affairs as “for people who don't have to work to make a living”—generously supplying my commentary title. His sentiment has tempted some diplomatic historians to write off working people altogether.² Our roundtable participants would vehemently disagree, positing instead an activist, left-leaning “working class,” poised (even at this hour) to overturn official U.S. foreign policy. I am not convinced, but I do agree that diplomatic historians should study thoughtfully the words and actions of working people. The flippant worker I cited, for instance, betrays a populist skepticism of power brokers. Daily pressures to “make a living” and secure limited gains undoubtedly fed a distrust of concentrated power—manifesting itself in countless ways. But that skepticism also extended to radical alternatives to that power—something labor historians are loath to acknowledge. We should continue to listen carefully to the voices of working people—always checking vigilantly that our own hopes and aspirations do not cloud their history.

Footnotes

1. Kazin Michael, “Limits of the Workplace,” *Labor History* 30 (Winter, 1989): 110–13
2. Thomas Paterson, *On Every Front: The Making and Unmaking of the Cold War* (New York, 1992), 145.