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REVIEW ARTICLE

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STRUGGLING AGAINST U. S. LABOR'S DECLINE UNDER LATE CAPITALISM: LESSONS FOR THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY

U. S. labor is in serious trouble. Over the last thirty years, private sector union density has continually plummeted, registering below *seven* percent in 2010. This is largely due to the hemorrhaging of members in the key manufacturing unions of the former Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), coupled with a lack of significant organizing success in established or newly emerging private sector industries. Although much smaller than the private sector, the public sector has continued to be a relatively bright spot for U. S. trade unionism at the end of the 21st century's first decade, with union density for federal, state and municipal government employees being more than five times higher than for their private sector counterparts, at 36.2%.

But this greater union strength among public workers might soon evaporate with the recent attacks on public sector unions by Republican administrations in the states of Wisconsin, Ohio, and Tennessee. As of this writing in April 2011, if these assaults prove ultimately successful, more state administrations will undoubtedly feel emboldened to follow suit.

This fall in private sector union density, of course, has had serious consequences for U. S. labor; it has contributed to a dramatic weakening of collective bargaining power and to the undermining of the use of the strike as a tactical weapon. Moreover, it appears to be the major factor in dissident unions leaving the AFL-CIO in the summer of 2005 and subsequently

establishing the Change to Win Federation (CTW) several months later.¹ This crisis, at least from labor's viewpoint, has generated much discussion among trade union officials, activists and sympathetic outsiders concerning the tactics to pursue for revitalizing the labor movement in the early 21st century.

The three books² reviewed in this essay provide meaningful contributions and extensions to the crucial dialog on what is needed for U. S. trade union movement revival in an era of neoliberal globalization and increasing employment insecurity. What Andrew Battista's *The Revival of Labor Liberalism*, Steve Early's *Embedded with Organized Labor: Journalistic Reflections on the Class War at Home*, and Steve K. Ashby and C. J. Hawking's *Staley: The Fight for a New American Labor Movement* make painstakingly clear is that the renewal of the U. S. labor movement — if there is to be one at this time — cannot simply occur through modest labor law modifications, such as the passing of the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), or electing allegedly “pro-labor” Democratic Party politicians to the White House or to the U. S. Congress. Although these volumes do not share the same theoretical perspectives, all provide convincing evidence that modest reforms will be unable, in and of themselves, to successfully resuscitate a flagging U. S. trade union movement. Tinkering around the edges of U. S. labor's strategy and tactics will hardly begin to address the fundamental problems. Clearly, what is needed is a thoroughgoing transformation, with active involvement and engagement of the unions' rank-and-file membership at levels that have largely been absent for more than the past few decades.

All three books are extremely critical of the stifling business unionism that had dominated the movement from the time of the AFL-CIO merger through the “New Voice” slate's election to the federation's leadership positions in 1995. As an alternative, they call for implementation of a social movement unionism. Although “social movement unionism” may have different definitions, the shared meaning is that workers and their organizations form alliances with other community groups in the pursuit of economic and social justice.

Battista rejects the entrenched business unionism of the first two AFL-CIO administrations of George Meany and Lane Kirkland, preferring instead the model espoused by Walter Reuther, the former United Auto Workers

1 For articles offering various perspectives, albeit with nuanced differences, on the Change to Win Federation as a rival federation to the AFL-CIO, see Chaison, 2007; Hurd, 2007; McNeill, 2007; Estreicher, 2006; Greer, 2006; Masters, Gibney & Zagenczyk, 2006.

2 *The Revival of Labor Liberalism*, by Andrew Battista. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2008. \$45.00. Pp. x, 268.

Embedded with Organized Labor: Journalistic Reflections on the Class War at Home, by Steve Early. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009. Paper, \$17.95. Pp. x, 288.

Staley: The Fight for a New American Labor Movement, by Steven K. Ashby and C. J. Hawking. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2009. \$75.00; paper, \$25.00. Pp. 384.

(UAW) president and leading force of the short-lived, reform-minded Alliance for Labor Action (ALA), created in 1968 (Devinatz, 2006; Treckel, 1975). Using the ALA as a model, Battista places his faith in a progressive union bureaucracy in coalition with other sympathetic organizations.

Early, as well as Ashby and Hawking, support a bottom-up revival of the trade union movement, calling for active participation of the membership in all aspects of union affairs, including alliances with other groups for attaining economic and social justice. Both sets of authors recognize and appreciate the positive roles that progressive union leaders can play; they realize, however, that this by itself is hardly enough to bring about the required and necessary transformations.

In *The Revival of Labor Liberalism*, Battista, a political scientist, documents the attempts to revitalize the labor-liberal coalition in the United States from the late 1970s through the late 1980s by examining the Progressive Alliance (PA), the Citizen Labor Energy Coalition (CLEC) and the National Labor Committee (NLC). These organizations were established at a time when the so-called labor-management accord was in effect, from 1945 to circa 1975,³ and the "success" of the trade union movement was beginning to unravel. Besides declining union density, by the early 1980s U. S. labor's decades-long gains obtained through inter- and intra-industry pattern bargaining were being threatened through the advent of concession bargaining and the implementation of labor-management cooperation programs.⁴ These developments, however, were unsuccessful in reviving a flagging trade union movement.

With the breakdown of Keynesianism signaled by the onset of the 1974-75 economic recession and the arrival of stagflation coupled with the emergence of a business-conservative alliance in the late 1970s, the PA, in October 1978, created a coalition of more than one hundred labor, civil rights, feminist, environmental, and community-organizing groups in an attempt to regenerate a fading labor liberalism. The group's three objectives were 1) to serve as an "anticorporate coalition" that would provide labor and liberals with the opportunity to counteract capital's attacks; 2) to act as a labor-liberal bloc within the Democratic party in encouraging party reform; and 3) to restore the labor-liberal coalition to exert a more influential role in national politics.

3 For conflicting interpretations of what the breakdown of this alleged postwar labor-management accord meant for one leader in the union bureaucracy's progressive wing, see Cowie, 2003; Devinatz, 2004.

4 Relevant articles discussing concession bargaining during the early 1980s include Craft, Aboushi and Labovitz, 1985; Cappelli, 1985. Labor-management cooperation programs have been generally depicted positively by industrial relations scholars. For example, see Duane, 1993; Brock, 1990; Cooke, 1990; Schuster, 1984. Scholarly literature appearing from a pro-union perspective that is critical of labor-management cooperation program participation include Parker and Slaughter, 1988, 1994; Wells, 1987; Parker, 1985.

Founded in April 1978, six months before the PA, the CLEC was another attempt at revitalizing the labor-liberal coalition in battling the hegemonic energy industry during the 1978-79 energy crisis. While the PA and CLEC were devoted to uniting labor and liberals in the pursuit of a progressive domestic agenda, political events in Nicaragua and El Salvador in 1979-80 resulted in dissident unions forming a liberal organization in opposition to the Reagan Administration's and the AFL-CIO's foreign policy objectives in Central America. Although the NLC's activities were first directed at ending military aid to the Duarte regime and towards encouraging a negotiated settlement to El Salvador's bloody civil war, the organization later included the goal of ending U. S. military aid to the Contras fighting to topple the Sandinista government.

Battista's analysis of his three case studies is missing one crucial element: the role of the rank-and-file union membership. The NLC was composed almost solely of national union presidents; additionally, the first two groups also were basically top-down organizations imposed by progressive union leaders, without membership involvement.

This point, however, might not be crucial for Battista, whose reform strategy does not depend upon rank-and-file participation *per se*. As previously mentioned, Battista identifies with the Reuther wing of the U. S. trade union movement. Viewing the short-lived ALA as a positive representation of Reuther's reform strategy, Battista fails to notice that the ALA functioned in a top-down manner that was guided by union leaders and staff (including Reuther himself) rather than motivated by rank-and-file members who were increasingly restive by the late 1960s. Furthermore, this was the same approach that Reuther adopted for administering the UAW, from the time he was elected president in 1946 until his untimely death in 1970. While Reuther formally espoused support and provided financial backing for an array of liberal causes, such as the civil rights movement, within his own union many rank-and-file members felt that the UAW president and his staff were uninterested in addressing problematic shop floor issues, including racial discrimination within the plants.

Consistent with this analysis, Battista perceives the "New Voice" slate's election to the AFL-CIO leadership as extremely positive, ultimately constituting the victory of the Reuther faction of dissident (or reform) unions over those in the Meany-Kirkland camp. Again, however, Battista fails to recognize that the Sweeney administration's strategy for reforming the AFL-CIO was also a primarily top-down affair.

Perhaps Battista promotes this reform strategy because he sees no viable alternative. In an econometric study, Goldfield (1987) addressed the reasons for the U. S. labor movement's decline nearly a quarter of a century ago. After investigating factors such as structural changes in the economy,

the social composition of the work force, etc., Goldfield concluded that organized labor's deterioration was ultimately due to the changing relation of class forces in the United States as indicated by employers more vigorously opposing union organizing drives, changes in U. S. labor law that benefit employers, and the unions' refusal to devote the necessary resources to battling membership loss.

Based on his findings, Goldfield speculated that business unionism's consolidation occurred within the CIO unions after the defeats suffered by the working class during the 1940s and 1950s, which ultimately culminated in the destruction of rank-and-file movements within the industrial unions. This conjecture implies that unions might have more effectively waged the class struggle against the employers' offensive throughout the late 20th–early 21st centuries if a sufficient level of rank-and-file activity had been sustained. Thus, in the absence of significant rank-and-file struggles in the late 1970s and the 1980s, when it came to reforming the AFL-CIO, the only agent able to carry out this agenda remained the liberal–progressive wing of the trade union bureaucracy.

Many of the essays in Early's book, *Embedded with Organized Labor*, were originally published in other outlets. Most of these tell the story of the U. S. labor movement's development through reviews of important books in the field. He divides his volume into five sections (*e.g.*, "Labor and the Left, Old and New;" "Race, Class, and Gender," etc.) which cover all of the relevant issues confronting the labor movement today. In comparison with the other two books discussed in this essay, Early provides a broader historical perspective on the U. S. trade union movement's rise and decline. If there is a unifying theme in his essays, it is that union democracy is not only highly desirable but absolutely necessary for reforming the labor movement and for its subsequent revival. Because Communist Party–led unions were generally more democratic than non-Communist ones (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, 2002), Early shows an abiding respect for Old Left labor leaders (and their organizations).

While clearly sympathetic to the Communists of the Old Left and the industrial unions⁵ that it led, Early is much less generous with the "New

5 There have been various treatments of the role of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) in the CIO from differing ideological viewpoints. Kampelman (1957) views the CPUSA's participation in the CIO with extreme hostility, while Cochran (1977), an ex-Trotskyist who had been active in the United Auto Workers, is also exceedingly critical of the Party's strategies. Levenstein (1981) delivers a balanced analysis, whereas Klehr (1984), who contends that the Party's trade union policy was ultimately determined in Moscow, outlines the CPUSA's increasingly central role in the establishment and expansion of the CIO during the mid- and late 1930s. Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (2002) discuss the many positive contributions of the CPUSA to the CIO, while pointing out how Party-led industrial unions obtained better contracts than those not led by the CPUSA.

Left” communists during the 1970s and 1980s in his essay dealing with Max Elbaum’s *Revolution in the Air*. Early criticizes these “Third World Marxists” of the “New Communist Movement” (NCM)⁶ for being far more interested in pursuing the correct political line through engaging in minute doctrinal disputes than in building rank-and-file reform movements within the unions and mass-based community organizations.

When the NCM did engage in labor work, its efforts were exemplified, according to Early, “by spectacular adventurism and ‘ultra-leftism,’ combined with a similar penchant for manipulation and behind-the-scenes maneuvering that hardly had a liberating effect on the working class” (50). As Elbaum acknowledges, the “New Communists” often discouraged any “bottom-up” organizing and “working class self-organization” (50) that NCM vanguard parties were unable to control. For example, the Maoist October League was savagely critical of Edward Sadlowski’s reform efforts in the United Steelworkers of America during the 1976–77 “Fight Back” campaign, denouncing him and other union reformers in his camp as “the main scabs and slickest defenders of the system” while referring to Sadlowski’s candidacy as “a trick by the bourgeoisie to channel the revolutionary aspirations and strivings of the masses into reformism” (51).

Moreover, the grassroots efforts of New Left rank-and-file organizers during the 1970s and 1980s often revealed contradictions in attempts to pursue both broader societal transformation and trade union reform at the point of production. These “colonizers,” often middle-class individuals who believed that social change had to originate within the working class, turned their former campus activism into organizing at industrial work sites. As Early points out in his essay reviewing Staughton and Alice Lynd’s *The New Rank and File*, colonizers who discussed Fidel and Mao did not endear themselves to their co-workers and might also experience physical attacks if not careful. By downplaying their socialist and communist principles, on the other hand, these organizers often successfully built reform caucuses within their unions and were elected to leadership positions while neglecting to articulate an alternative vision of society.

By the time of Sweeney’s 1995 victory, a number of these former colonizers had been appointed as AFL-CIO field representatives and department heads, ready to lead the charge in reshaping the federation, not from the shop floor this time but from the corridors of power. There is little doubt that, *ceteris paribus*, having left-wing union staff members as leaders was an improvement on more conservative unionists occupying such important

6 Although deriving its inspiration from the Russian, Chinese and Cuban Revolutions, the NCM was a (primarily Maoist) Marxist–Leninist tendency coming out of the New Left during the 1970s and 1980s. These NCM organizations are outlined in O’Brien, 1977–1978.

positions. Unfortunately, no matter how progressive the intentions of this recently appointed union officialdom, following the lead of Sweeney and his "New Voice" administration, these former New Leftists actively constructed a *social movement unionism from above* rather than a social movement unionism from below. Adopting essentially the same strategy used while in NCM groups, perhaps these New Left activists believed that with the enlightened Sweeney administration replacing the previous conservative regimes of Meany and Kirkland, they would be able to solve all of the trade unions' current problems simply by using their knowledge, expertise and commitment. In essence, these New Leftists, although without a party, would substitute themselves as the "vanguard" for the direct participation and energy of the rank-and-file membership.

This social movement unionism from above was ultimately determined by the AFL-CIO's officialdom, rather than depending on the active participation of rank-and-file union members. As an example, while Sweeney hoped to significantly expand union membership through allocating more financial resources to union organizing, his strategy consisted of using *professional organizers* rather than turning rank-and-file unionists into organizers themselves. He remained committed to this tactic although a study, commissioned by the AFL-CIO, found that unions prevailed in 73% of the certification elections in which rank-and-file organizers were used, compared to 27% when only professional organizers were employed (Moody, 1998).

A second characteristic of this social movement unionism from above, as detailed by Moody (1998), was Sweeney's reliance on Washington-based tactics which also excluded rank-and-file input in either their development or execution. He clearly felt more at ease with ostensible experts from institutes and policy centers in arriving at recommended solutions to the labor movement's woes and then publicly announcing them through expensive media and marketing campaigns. Although they were extremely professional, these presentations were unable to generate a sustained energy among trade unionists themselves.

Indisputably, in spite of its inadequacies, this brand of social movement unionism is superior to the ingrained and corrosive business unionism that it replaced. But Sweeney's strategy was insufficient for tackling the endemic challenges that will continue to confront unions. Trade unionists determined to reverse the *status quo* must articulate an alternative vision to social movement unionism from above if they hope to transcend the current state of labor affairs during the current Trumka and future post-Trumka administrations.

Besides suffering political defeats, disappointments over unfulfilled union reform efforts, and an internally divided U. S. trade union movement during the past 30 years, union activists also have had to confront an era of disastrous work stoppages, including the strike of the Professional Air Traffic

Controllers Organization (Round, 1999; Nordlund, 1998; Shostak and Skocik, 1986), the Greyhound bus drivers' walkout, the Local P-9 work stoppage against Hormel (Rachleff, 1993; Green 1990) and the United Paperworkers' Local 14 strike against International Paper (Getman, 1998). Additional work stoppages throughout the 1990s went down to defeat: Staley, Caterpillar, (Devinatz, 2005; Cohen, 2002; Franklin, 2001) and Detroit Newspapers — although the victorious 1997 UPS strike (Witt and Wilson, 1999, 1998; Rothstein, 1997) remains an outlier. Ashby and Hawking's volume, *Staley: The Fight for a New American Labor Movement*, deals with one of these landmark industrial conflicts (and defeats) in the mid-1990s, the A. E. Staley Company lockout of the Allied Industrial Workers Local 837, in Decatur's (Illinois) "war zone."

Ashby and Hawking, who were activists in support of the locked-out workers, recount the events leading up to the dispute, the lockout itself and its aftermath in tremendous and colorful detail. The tactics and strategies used by the Staley workers before and during the lockout are uniformly applauded by union reformers and are indicative of a healthy rank-and-file union democracy and social movement unionism. During a collective bargaining dispute a union failing to encourage rank-and-file participation in the decision-making process and refusing to attempt to build coalitions within the community, which then loses, is one thing. But what if the union does all the things labor *should* be doing and is still defeated? This is the situation that confronted the Staley workers, who fought valiantly and still were vanquished. Unfortunately, virtue alone does not guarantee victory.

Ashby and Hawking argue that the union's major mistake was wasting valuable time and energy on State Farm Insurance, which had more ambiguous ties to Tate & Lyle, Staley's parent company, than on potentially more fruitful targets such as Miller Beer. But the more pressing problem haunting Local 837 throughout its two-and-one-half-year lockout was that it was unable to exert enough pressure to interfere sufficiently with the company's production in Decatur, the other 23 plants located throughout the United States or for that matter with Tate & Lyle's global operations in 50 countries. The company's other U. S. factories were either nonunion or had agreements negotiated by other labor organizations with varying expiration dates. Moreover, the contentious issue concerning the introduction of 12-hour rotating shifts had already been implemented in 20 company plants. Finally, the lack of union solidarity within the plant resulted in building trades craft unionists continuing to work during the lockout, which further eroded Local 837's bargaining strength.

Unfortunately, Ashby and Hawking's story is similar to that of Rachleff (1993), who played a similar activist role, as reported in his book on the strike of Local P-9 of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union

against Hormel in Austin (Minnesota) in 1985–86. Barbara Kopple covers the same ground in her award-winning documentary, “American Dream.” While the Local 837 members initiated social movement unionism from below as did the Hormel strikers, what these stories tell us is that such unionism is not always successful in achieving union victories in labor disputes. The Staley lockout and the Hormel strike indicated that extensive rank-and-file participation in creating a social unionism will not necessarily lead to victory if the workers are unable to negatively impact production at the targeted facility.

While Rachleff (1993, 88) is highly critical of “American Dream,” referring to it as “tell(ing) a distorted and disempowering story,” the documentary recounts the tensions and difficulties in constructing a viable social movement unionism from below. Internal divisions within Local P-9, combined with the fact that 450 (out of 1500) members eventually crossed the picket line, helped to undermine the strike and any of the advantages derived from a bottom-up social movement unionism.

Other lessons concerning the benefits and the limits in constructing a social movement unionism from below can be derived from Fink (2003), who investigates the largely Guatemalan immigrant work force’s attempt to unionize Case Farms in Morganton (North Carolina). While the Laborers Union achieved victory in the 1995 certification election because the Case Farms workers had become effective rank-and-file organizers themselves, the employees, unfortunately, were unsuccessful in attaining a collective bargaining agreement, although they used corporate and consumer campaigns while building international solidarity to back their cause. When the Laborers pulled out in 2001, the union, nevertheless, funded a Workers Center that continued to support the workers’ social movement union activities. Even without a contract, their practice of social movement unionism enabled them to remain united and to continue to exert pressure on the company.

Nonetheless, one Laborers’ staff member, Yanira Merino, acknowledged her frustration with the structural obstacles preventing the negotiation of a contract. “It’s sad,” she said. “Basically you’ve got no protection under the NLRB, no tools within the law that we can use to push companies like Case Farms” (Fink, 2003, 197). And as Brody (2005) argues, the Wagner Act model of U. S. labor legislation impedes worker self-organization as well as the establishment of social movement unionism from below. As he clearly elucidates in his extensive discussions of the evolution of U. S. labor law, the deck was stacked against workers organizing unions and achieving collective bargaining agreements shortly after the National Labor Relations Act’s implementation in 1935. And with labor organizations confronting bureaucratic processes to obtain employer recognition and contracts, unions often depend on bureaucratic methods for reforming this fundamentally flawed system, such as supporting the passage of the Employee Free Choice Act, rather than

engaging in activities that will actually contribute to worker self-organization. For example, unlike in most of the world's industrial democracies, U. S. labor law permits workers to be permanently replaced during economic strikes and temporarily replaced during lockouts, as occurred during the Hormel strike and the Staley lockout, respectively.

With Sweeney's retirement in the fall of 2009, it has become clear that 14 years of reform efforts at the federation in the spirit of the Reuther tradition have failed to halt the continuing slide of the trade union movement. Moreover, in spite of the UFCW's major organizing victory at Smithfield Foods in North Carolina in 2008 (*Workers Vanguard*, 2009) the CTW's prospects as a whole are no better than that of the AFL-CIO, with the CTW appearing to be much more similar to the short-lived ALA than to the CIO during its halcyon days of the mid-1930s to mid-1940s (Devinatz, 2010).

The one *brighter* spot in the U. S. trade union movement, as mentioned above, is the relative strength and stability of public sector union density over the last two decades. In fact, beginning in 2009, for the first time in U. S. history, there were more government workers than private sector employees who are union members. This, of course, is due not to the dramatic increase in the number of public sector union members but to the continuing erosion of private sector union membership, accelerated by the continued hemorrhaging of unionized jobs in the manufacturing and related industries during the Great Recession of 2008–09.

Public sector unionists have even taken the first steps in reviving a rank-and-file activism that has not been seen for at least two decades through their participation in February 2011 rallies in support of Wisconsin government union members maintaining their collective bargaining rights. To have a chance at successfully defeating the current assault on public sector unions that is likely to continue in the near future, energized rank-and-file public workers must unite with private sector trade unionists and other progressive organizations to defend their hard-won gains achieved through decades of struggle.

The point is not to idealize rank-and-file militancy because it sounds enviable from a theoretical and moral perspective. As Early points out, the Service Employees International Union has seen expanded growth through an extremely top-down model of union organization which often involves cutting deals with employers. But to what end? The ultimate goal of increasing union density should be to advance the interests of the union membership (and other workers as well), not to acquire more members so that the union is larger on paper and can collect more dues. Stated another way, is it desirable to have a numerically sizeable union movement only for the sake of increased membership, although it would be largely ineffective in engaging in the class struggle?

Easy answers for the U. S. labor movement's revitalization, unfortunately, remain elusive. A top-down unionism, even of a social movement variety, implemented by a progressive union officialdom appears insufficient. In fact, in the UFCW's organizing success at Smithfield Foods, it was largely minority and immigrant rank-and-file workers taking ownership of the organizing drive, rather than relying on a union staff-driven campaign, that culminated in employer recognition of the union. The same can be said concerning the successful plant occupation that United Electrical Workers (UE) Local 1110 conducted against Republic Door and Window in Chicago in December 2008, where a largely immigrant work force, in fighting for the wages and severance pay that the company owed them, took control of the situation, after the factory's abrupt closure (Lydersen, 2009). Such a bottom-up social movement unionism hardly guarantees success in all situations, as in the case of the Staley lockout. Nevertheless, it does, perhaps, offer the best route for true union movement revival, given the remaining options available and the obstacles that lie ahead.

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