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Labor Embattled: History, Power, Rights

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Labor Embattled: History, Power, Rights, by David Brody. The Working Class in American History Series. Urbana and Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005. x, 166 pp. Notes, index. \$40 cloth, \$20 paper.

Reviewer Peter Rachleff is professor of history at Macalester College. He is the author of *Hard-Pressed in the Heartland: The Hormel Strike and the Future of the Labor Movement* (1993).

For more than 40 years, David Brody has been a central figure in the practice of labor history in the United States. His scholarship and that of his graduate students have left a distinctive mark on the field. More than most fields, labor history has been particularly driven by scholars who have turned to the study of the past in order to make sense out of their present. This has not only given labor historians a strong sense of purpose, but it has also fueled intense disagreements among them. Over the past four decades the American labor movement has slid into an ever-deepening crisis, shrinking from representing one-third of the workforce to less than one-seventh of it, with a commensurate decline in power and influence. Given this “calamity . . . that has overtaken the working people and institutions” (viii), labor historians’ questions about the past have carried considerable energy and edge.

The University of Illinois Press has performed a valuable service by collecting this set of Professor Brody’s articles, which are distinguished by their explicit quest for connections between past and present. Brody’s preface and his brief stage-setting introductions to each article add a layer of contextualization, encouraging readers to consider the essays not only as forays into the study of the past and as prompted by specific issues at the time that the author undertook them—what he calls their “footprints” (viii)—but also as building blocks of an overall analysis of the peculiarities of the development of the American labor movement. It is unfortunate that the publisher and author of this collection did not choose to add an explicitly comprehensive essay at its end, instead leaving the task of synthesis to readers.

When labor history made a great intellectual leap forward in the late 1960s and 1970s, influenced, on the one hand, by the impacts of the civil rights, Black Power, and women’s movements on the thinking of a new generation of historians, and, on the other hand, by E. P. Thompson’s magisterial *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), its perspective moved away from the institutional, labor relations, trade union-focused framework of the “Wisconsin School” of John R. Commons, Philip Taft, and Selig Perlman. Many new scholars placed more emphasis on culture and consciousness, on race, gender, and ethnicity, and on the workplace as a milieu for workers’ lives, struggles, and values. We turned to a new social history.

Brody and his students were not immune to these influences and intellectual currents, but they continued to insist that the study of unions and labor relations was central to labor history ("Labor's Institutional Sources of Expansion and Contraction," 30-45). Whereas many of us unearthed songs, poems, cartoons, and personal letters and diaries as primary sources, the "Brody School" pursued close readings of union constitutions, meeting minutes, collective bargaining agreements, laws, and judicial decisions. They also refused to dismiss the contributions of the "Wisconsin School" and other "institutional" labor historians ("Responsibilities of the Labor Historian," 1-15).

Labor Embattled provides its readers with an opportunity to assess the value of this perspective. As someone who once identified with a cohort of labor historians who were quite critical of the "Brody School," I must admit to being impressed with the insights contained in this set of essays, even as I continue to find their scope too narrow.

Brody finds the sources of labor's contemporary weakness, its inability to prevent the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 from being "hijacked by its natural enemies" and "subverted" (vii), deep in the history of unions, the labor movement, and labor relations in the United States. He argues, with a logic similar to that put forward by Perlman and Taft, that American workers have been distinguished by a "job consciousness," "workplace contractualism," and "voluntarism" that turned their unions' focus to their own members rather than to the working class more generally, to their employers rather than to the state, and to collective bargaining rather than to political and social action ("The Future of the Labor Movement in Historical Perspective," 16-29). Furthermore, union activists put their emphasis on building national structures, mirroring the development of businesses and taking control of activism away from local leaders ("World War I and Industrial Democracy; or, Why We Have No Works Councils in America," 62-81). In essence, legislation has served only to secure the legal status of unions and collective bargaining, while all the content of labor relations has been shaped through employer relationships, bargaining, and contracts ("Reforming the American Workplace?," 82-98, and "On the Representation Election," 99-109). These foundations, structures, practices, and traditions have, according to Brody, set narrow parameters within which unions and labor relations have been, are, and can be reformed or transformed in the United States. While they rule out the kind of "labor-management cooperation" pushed in the first Clinton administration, they also rule out the reforms currently being sought by unions through the "Employee Free Choice Act."

In the end (although, as I've noted, this collection really doesn't have an end), Brody leaves his readers virtually squashed by the dead weight of history. There seems to have been—and to be—no alternative. This is where the contributions of that other school of thought in labor history's debates of the 1960s and 1970s can provide us with some hope. Paying more attention to "who" the workers are (race, gender, ethnicity) and the values, experiences, and traditions they bring into the workplace and into unions, to their cultures and consciousness and its complex relationships to dominant structures, value systems, and cultural practices, can help us explore alternatives to the hand that history has dealt us. How might labor historians bring together the profound decline of union institutions, on the one hand, with the massive immigrant demonstrations of April and May 2006, demonstrations that proclaimed "I am a Worker, Not a Criminal," "No Human Is Illegal," and "I Demand My Rights"? How might the millions of immigrants who marched in Los Angeles, Chicago, St. Paul, New York City, and elsewhere hold answers to the crisis of the labor movement in their hands? That Brody's carefully crafted and compelling framework can offer only silence to such important questions should force readers, even as they learn valuable insights from *Labor Embattled*, to keep pushing for more.

Farmers vs. Wage Earners: Organized Labor in Kansas, 1860–1960, by R. Alton Lee. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. xiv, 340 pp. Illustrations, map, table, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00 cloth.

Reviewer Wilson J. Warren is associate professor of history at Western Michigan University. His most recent book is *Tied to the Great Packing Machine: The Midwest and Meatpacking* (University of Iowa Press, 2007). He is also the author of "The 'People's Century' in Iowa: Coalition-Building among Farm and Labor Organizations, 1945–1950" in the *Annals of Iowa* (1988).

Historians have written little about the relationships between farmers and wage earners in American history. With few exceptions, perhaps most notably Lawrence Goodwyn's pathbreaking work on the Populist movement, American working-class historians have usually contented themselves with generalizations about the hostility of farmers and farm organizations to organized labor and workers and vice versa. Yet, especially in the Midwest during much of the twentieth century, farmers *became* laborers; that is, over the course of the century farmers either took industrial jobs on a part-time basis to bolster their income or, more often, they left farming on a permanent basis and pursued industrial employment. Aside from the work of James N. Gregory and