

Class, Race and Corporate Power

Volume 5

Issue 2 *U.S. Labor and Social Justice*

Article 3

2017

John L. Lewis and His Critics: Some Forgotten Labor History That Still Matters Today

Staughton Lynd
salynd@aol.com

DOI: [10.25148/CRCP.5.2.006507](https://doi.org/10.25148/CRCP.5.2.006507)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower>

 Part of the [Labor History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lynd, Staughton (2017) "John L. Lewis and His Critics: Some Forgotten Labor History That Still Matters Today," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

DOI: [10.25148/CRCP.5.2.006507](https://doi.org/10.25148/CRCP.5.2.006507)

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol5/iss2/3>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts, Sciences & Education at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Class, Race and Corporate Power by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

John L. Lewis and His Critics: Some Forgotten Labor History That Still Matters Today

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to propose a new answer to the question of "what happened to the Congress of Industrial Organizations?" Lynd argues the CIO became what its creator, United Mine Workers (UMW) president John L. Lewis, intended it to be. This approach is juxtaposed with the approach taken by A.J. Muste, who helped to lead the cotton textile strike of 1919 to victory, then founded the Brookwood Labor School—probably the most radical and effective school for workers in American history.

Keywords

Social Justice, Social Justice Unionism, CIO

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Cover Page Footnote

Staughton Lynd has lived an active life both in and out of academia. His work in labor history includes several collections of oral histories, edited with his wife Alice, of which the first and best-known is entitled "Rank and File" and has been reprinted three times, most recently by Haymarket Books. He was the lead counsel for a coalition of local groups, together with the incumbent Republican Congressman, who attempted to stop U.S. Steel from closing all its Youngstown, Ohio facilities in 1979-1980.

Introduction

What happened to the radicalism of the CIO? It was the great hope of my parents' generation. But in the 1960s, we in the Movement waited in vain for the labor movement to take a stand against the Vietnam war. And when corporate America began to move manufacturing to low wage locations in the 1970s, there was a "management prerogatives" clause in the contracts of all the new industrial unions that forced them to stand on the sidelines as their members' work left town.

I recall a gathering at the apartment of Paul Booth, one of the first presidents of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and, later on, organizing director of AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees). The question of the day was that posed above: What happened to the radicalism of the CIO? The answers offered included: (1) in contrast to the explicit intent of the draft persons of the Wagner Act,¹ the Supreme Court ruled that workers who went on strike could be "replaced," that is, fired; (2) during World War II, the labor movement abandoned the strike, turned to grievance arbitration, and never found its way back to direct action; (3) after World War II, the Taft-Hartley Act and McCarthyism drove Left wingers out of the unions; (4) throughout the years 1935-1945, CIO staff associated with the Communist Party downplayed conflict with the Democratic Party in the interest of building an anti-fascist political coalition.

The purpose of this essay is to propose another answer: The CIO became what its creator, United Mine Workers (UMW) president John L. Lewis, intended it to be. It was a group of unions each of which, like the UMW, required all the workers on a given work site to become members, and these unions served as the exclusive representative of those workers in collective bargaining. When CIO unions were recognized by employers as exclusive bargaining representatives, dues were deducted from workers' paychecks by the employer and forwarded to the union. Typical CIO contracts contained two key provisions: a "management prerogative clause" that allowed the employer to close and move production facilities at its discretion, and a "no-strike clause" that prevented the workers from doing anything effective about such decisions. Finally, while radical organizers and militant tactics were used to obtain the position of exclusive representative, once the new unions were recognized by management, those organizers were fired.

Author after author, labor historians on the Left have compiled a devastating critique of John L. Lewis' style of trade unionism. We agree that Lewis' management style, first in the United Mine Workers (UMW) and then in financing and supervising the formation of the CIO, was not merely "business unionism"; it was dictatorial, autocratic and explicitly anti-Communist or anti-socialist business unionism. Indeed, Lewis advertised the CIO to business leaders as a remedy for wildcat strikes and other industrial direct action.² The new CIO unions deliberately broke up militant local industrial unions like Local 65 of the Steelworkers in South Chicago and Local 156 of the UAW in Flint (Lynd, 1996: 12-14). Even mainstream labor historian David Brody writes that Lewis "made no bones about his contempt for democratic processes With John L. Lewis as the heroic figure of the 1930s, it is no wonder that those great days did not transform American trade unionism into a social movement" (Brody, 1980: 169-170).

Lewis: Con and Pro

Yet when we come to the last pages of their books or the final paragraphs of their articles, radical historians often give Lewis and the CIO unions that he sponsored and financed a free pass.

Lewis' sharpest critic may be Jim Pope (2003). Pope writes that "according to the standard story" of labor history in the 1930s, Lewis, anticipating the enactment of section 7(a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act, committed the entire treasury of the United Mine Workers in May 1933 to a massive organizing campaign in the soft coal fields. Thanks to Lewis' far-sighted leadership, we have been told, in little more than a year UMW membership quintupled, from about a hundred thousand to about half a million.

The reality, according to Pope, was altogether different. Miners in southwestern Pennsylvania began to organize more than two and a half months **before** the passage of the NIRA. Paid UMW staff initially opposed the rank-and-file initiatives or dragged their feet. Pope says that Lewis was

a step behind the local union activists. His celebrated organizing campaign was not launched until after rank-and-file miners had already rejuvenated the union. Once deployed, his organizers worked persistently to undermine the strike movement that eventually delivered the code. . . . Thus, the sensational recovery of the UMW—later touted by Lewis as a product of centralized discipline and federal government lawmaking—was in fact brought about by a democratic movement of local activists enforcing their own vision of the right to organize (Pope, 2003).

This article was published in 2003, almost fifteen years ago. Nonetheless the late James Green, in his otherwise magnificent book on West Virginia miners, *The Devil Is Here in These Hills*, manages to turn a bone-chilling narrative of Lewis' repression of rank-and-file miners like Frank Keeney into a paean of praise to none other than John L. Lewis (Green, 2015). Ignoring Pope's work, Green first tells us that the NIRA was the result of a "relentless lobbying effort" by Lewis, William Green, and their allies to win "federal assistance for organized labor."

Then, again ignoring Pope's findings, Green tells us that the challenge to the UMW was to "exploit the NIRA's promise," and that it did so by "putting their toughest activists on the payroll and mobilizing them for an all-out organizing drive in the nation's coalfields."

Two pages later we are told that "miners caught up in the union drive devoted songs, prayers, and poems to their savior, John L. Lewis." Two more pages go by and Pope's story of union locals being re-energized or created from below, against the opposition of the UMW's staff, has been transformed into Green's description of a public demonstration in which UMW bureaucrat Van Bittner administered the union oath of allegiance to five thousand men over a loudspeaker (Green, 2015: 326-332).

Was the Little Steel Strike a Catastrophe?

I want to emphasize again that the cacophony of praise for Lewis comes not only from the Right but also from the Left. Take the history of the steelworkers.

The most radical analysis of the labor history of the 1930s is probably that set forth in the essay “Punching Out.” Published initially during 1952, it was labeled as the product of an individual, the late Marty Glaberman (2002). Actually, it seems, while written out by Glaberman, the booklet was the product of the collective learning experience of the entire so-called Johnson Forest group, affiliated with C.L.R. James.

“Punching Out” refers to the “catastrophic strike in Little Steel” (Glaberman, 2002: 13). Little Steel was made up of the major steel companies other than the largest steel company, U.S. Steel, and the Little Steel strike was the walkout in 1937 that included the “Memorial Day Massacre” in South Chicago.

But was the Little Steel strike a catastrophe?

I have been puzzled for many years by the conflicting assessments of the Little Steel strike by John Sargent, head of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee at Inland Steel and then several times president of the United Steelworkers of America local union there, and by just about everybody else, including radicals like Glaberman.

For instance, Ahmed White (2016), in his recently-published book *The Last Great Strike: Little Steel, the CIO, and the Struggle for Labor Rights in New Deal America*, voices the general opinion when he writes “the strike was broken” (White, 2016: 225). But Sargent, when I knew him about 1970 and when he spoke at a forum that I helped to organize, considered the outcome of the strike at Inland Steel a “victory of great proportions” (Sargent, 2011: 107). How could both statements be true?

The answer was suggested by White’s book. I had assumed that because the strike was settled at Inland by an agreement, in Sargent’s words, “through the [Indiana] governor’s office,” it presumably applied to all Little Steel facilities in the state of Indiana, or at least to the Youngstown Sheet & Tube complex adjacent to the Inland steel facility in East Chicago, Indiana.

However, White (2016: 223-224) convinces me that the Inland Steel settlement was unique. “Sheet & Tube,” he explains, “had been a party to the talks that led to the Inland agreement but withdrew just as the accord was reached.”

The fact that the Inland settlement was one of a kind does not detract from its importance. Here are Sargent’s own words at the community forum mentioned above.

The settlement provided that the company would recognize and bargain with “the Steelworkers Union and the company union and any other organization that wanted to represent the people in the steel industry” (Sargent, 2011: 107). And if it is assumed that only the **exclusive** right to bargain for the workers in an appropriate bargaining unit constituted victory, and steelworkers at the huge Inland Steel complex did not achieve such exclusive status, they must have been defeated.

But defeat was not what was experienced by rank-and-file workers on the ground. White confirms that at Inland the company “reopened the Indiana Harbor mill amid cries of victory from thousands of jubilant workers” (White, 2016: 223). And during the next five years, 1937 to roughly 1942, since they had not entered into a typical CIO contract that required them to give up the right to strike during the duration of the bargaining agreement, Inland Steel workers could and they did back up their demands with successful direct action.

In Sargent’s words: “The enthusiasm of the people who were working in the mills made this settlement of the strike into a victory of great proportions.” As he explained it:

Without a contract, without any agreement with the company, without any regulation concerning hours of work, conditions of work, or wages, a tremendous

surge took place. We talk of a rank-and-file movement: the beginning of union organization was the best kind of rank-and-file movement you could think of.... The union organizers were essentially workers in the mill who were so disgusted with their conditions and so ready for a change that they took the union into their own hands.

Without a contract we secured for ourselves agreements on working conditions and wages that we do not have today, and that were better by far than what we have today in the mill. For example, as a result of the enthusiasm of the people in the mill you had a series of strikes, wildcats, shut-downs, slow-downs, anything working people could think of to secure for themselves what they decided they had to have. If their wages were low there was no contract to prohibit them from striking, and they struck for better wages. If their conditions were bad, if they didn't like what was going on, if they were being abused, the people in the mills themselves—without a contract or any agreement with the company involved—would shut down a department or even a group of departments to secure for themselves the things they found necessary (Lynd and Lynd, 2011: 223).

My wife and I also interviewed Nick Migas, grievance committee man for the Inland Steel open hearth department where iron ore was made into steel (Lynd and Lynd, 2011: 168-169). In those days, from 1937 until early in World War II, grievances tended to be negotiated with the supervisors immediately involved because the men could always simply stop work. They also tended to be settled more rapidly, for the same reason. Migas offered the example of a grievance for the charging car operators:

They had increased the tonnage on the furnaces without increasing the rate. We discussed this question with the superintendent; nothing doing. So that night it started to slow down, and by the next morning there were two furnaces where they had to shut the heat off. By that evening, there were six furnaces that had to shut the heat off. They settled that grievance in a hurry (Lynd and Lynd, 2011: 168-169).

The testimony by a third Inland steelworker, Joe Gyurko, is cited by Kim Scipes (2003: 156) to the same effect. Gyurko recalls that in the 1936-42 pre-contract period,

departmental strikes were common. When foremen or supervisors refused to deal with pressing issues affecting work conditions, the men thought nothing of stopping work and letting gondolas full of molten steel hang in mid-air. In these situations, the rapidly approaching danger that production would be interrupted in order to clean out the gondola and reheat the steel acted as a time clock, forcing the company to bargain with the workers (Scipes, 2003: 156, citing Nyden, 1984: 24).

Academic sources support the recollection of these rank-and-file workers. Robert R. Brooks quotes John Mayo, subregional director of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee in Youngstown: “In some respects the union was better off [in Little Steel] than in many U.S. Steel

plants since it was not bound by a contract to confine its grievance claims to matters covered by the contract. It was able, therefore, to press and sometimes win grievance claims which under the standard steel contract would be thrown out in the early stages of adjustment” (Brooks, 1940: 146).

After citing Sargent and Migas in *Rank and File*, and examining the grievance committee minutes at Inland Steel during the late 1930s, Lizabeth Cohen states that “at steel mills where the SWOC did not yet have contracts and hence did not control the rank and file, shop floor agitation persisted” (Cohen, 1990: 306-307).

Is Members-only Bargaining a Transitional Stage or a Permanent Arrangement?

In 2005, Charles J. Morris published *The Blue Eagle at Work: Reclaiming Democratic Rights in the American Workplace*.³ In effect, the book suggested that what workers at Inland Steel experienced after settlement of the Little Steel strike was what is today referred to as “minority” or “members-only” unionism, legally protected, according to Morris, by Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act.

The critical difference between what Morris describes and what Sargent and his co-workers experienced is that Morris understands members-only unionism as a **transitional stage** toward exclusive representation by a single union. Morris’ perception is evident throughout his book. The following characterizations are drawn from the opening pages. I have emphasized the words that distinguish his outlook from Sargent’s.

*[T]he National Labor Relations Act indelibly guarantees the right of minority-union employees to engage in members-only collective bargaining where a majority of the employees have **not yet** designated an exclusive union representative.” (Morris, 2005: xvi).*

*Although the **ultimate goal** of the Wagner Act was the institution of exclusive collective bargaining with majority unions, in workplaces where majority bargaining was **not yet** established, Congress did not intend to bar minority-union members-only bargaining” (Morris, 2005: 4-5).*

*The legislative history of the 1935 Wagner Act shows positively that its authors fully and intentionally protected . . . all minority-union bargaining that would occur **prior to mature majority-based exclusive bargaining**” (Morris, 2005: 10).*

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the first quarter of the 20th century and individual radicals like John Sargent in the second quarter understood minority unionism quite differently. They believed that they were creating a new world within the shell of the old. They intended a unionism to exist permanently in which problems were settled as they arose and the right to strike was never given up.

In my Introduction to a book of essays about the “alternative unions” of the early 1930s (Lynd, 1996: 4). I commented that while working on the book, I had been struck by “the resemblance between the ‘alternative unionism’ of the 1930s and the rank-and-file militancy of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

Individual Wobblies or former Wobblies were often involved in the local industrial unions of the 1930s (Lynd, 1996: 4-5). In some situations, the rank-and-file militancy of the

IWW and the efforts of a more traditional union to establish itself in a particular workplace or company co-existed for many years.

Thus in the anthracite coal fields of eastern Pennsylvania, IWW membership from 1906 to 1916 was about equal to membership in the United Mine Workers. The late Michael Kozura pointed out that “anthracite miners continued to rely on illegal wildcat strikes and other forms of direct action, refused on principle to submit grievances to arbitration, tenaciously resisted the contractual regulation of their labor, opposed union dues check-off, habitually rebelled against the UMW’s dictatorial leadership, and sustained this militant syndicalism into the late 1940s” (Lynd, 1996: 4, citing Kozura, 1996).

A Wobbly style of organizing was sometimes in evidence even when flesh-and- blood Wobblies were not. David Montgomery has suggested that “in many ways the struggles of 1916-1922 . . . presaged those of at least the early 1930s, that is, before the founding of the Committee for Industrial Organization and the enactment of the Wagner Act” (Lynd, 1996: 5, citing Montgomery, 1987: 457).

The Westinghouse plant east of Pittsburgh is an example of such continuity. Montgomery describes how just before World War I the Westinghouse workers created an “inplant organization made up of their own elected delegates” that cut across traditional craft lines. The organization “copied the IWW by devoting itself to struggles around demands, rather than negotiating contracts” (Lynd, 1996: 5). More than twenty years later, when the CIO established itself in the same plant, bargaining was at first carried on in the same Wobbly manner. According to Ronald Schatz,

an arrangement existed whereby plant managers would meet with the leaders of UE Local 601 to negotiate such issues as hours of work or layoff policy, then depart to post the results of their discussions as if management had merely consulted with the union leadership. Although there were few if any Wobblies . . . in the plant, the local had arrived at an IWW-style bargaining relationship. There were no contracts; all agreements could be abrogated by either party at any time; and grievances were settled quickly according to the strength of the workers on the floor of the plant (Lynd, 1996: 5, citing Schatz, 1983: 73).

As at Westinghouse, the spirit of alternative unionism often carried over into the strongest **local unions** of the emerging CIO. Many CIO locals, not only in steel, anthracite mining, and electrical work, but also in the automobile assembly and rubber tire industries, initially **opposed** workplace contractualism in the form of written contracts and the dues checkoff. Sylvia Woods, who belonged to a UAW local in Chicago during World War II, recalled: “We never had a check-off. We didn’t want it” (Lynd, 1996: 5, citing Woods, 2011: 118).⁴ In rubber, sit-downs at General Tire, Firestone, and elsewhere convinced tire makers that “progress did not have to await a formal contract.” Goodrich Local 5 in Akron, whose 13,000 members made it the largest local union in the United Rubber Workers, for several years in the 1930s deliberately declined to enter into a collective bargaining agreement (Lynd, 1996: 5, citing Borsos, 1992: 25-26).

Although Goodrich was willing in April 1937 to come to an agreement, the first contract was not signed until May 27, 1938. [Local union leaders] felt that unless all demands were won, an agreement would so restrict freedom of action that it

would not be worthwhile (Lynd, 1996: 21, endnote #24, citing Anthony, 1942: 654).

Thus a community-based, horizontally-bonded culture of struggle, with roots in such epic battles as the 1916 Westinghouse strike, the Lawrence, Massachusetts strikes of cotton textile workers in 1912 and 1919, community-based strikes in coal mining and cotton textile towns in the 1920s, and the Little Steel Strike at Inland Steel, pervaded the alternative unionism of the early 1930s and the first years of many CIO local unions.

Accordingly we are left with a “road not taken” that would make possible not only a consistently bottom-up recasting of modern American labor history, but a joyful convergence with historians of Polish Solidarity, with narrators of what didn’t happen in France in 1968, and above all, with George Orwell and Noam Chomsky in offering homage to the anarcho-syndicalist movement in Catalonia during the Spanish civil war (see Chomsky, 2005).⁵

The Road Not Taken May Still Be There

The work that may come closest to the kind of pervasively radical history for which I am calling is Frank Bardacke’s *Trampling out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers*.

A number of recent articles and books call into question the myths that surrounded Cesar Chavez, beginning in the 1960s and for another twenty years following his death in 1993. Bardacke’s work stands out for its deep immersion in rank-and-file sources and, analytically, for its perception of the influence of Saul Alinsky.

One of Alinsky’s books, a biography of John L. Lewis, was a breathless paean of praise to its subject. It happens that for about three years, I was one of the original faculty of Alinsky’s Industrial Areas Foundation Training Institute. I remember Alinsky commenting with wonder that for periods of time in the mid-1930s, there was more mention of Lewis by the media than of President Franklin Roosevelt.

Alinsky is the link between Lewis and **both** the conventional misstatement of how the NLRA and CIO came into being **and** liberal adulation of Chavez as a supposed alternative to Lewis’ top-down organizing style. In a chapter entitled “The Alchemist,” Bardacke spells out Saul Alinsky’s influence on Cesar Chavez.

Alinskyite community organizing, Bardacke writes, has become “a codified discipline, with core theoretical propositions, recognized heresies, disciples, neophytes, and splits. It is a political theory....” (Bardacke, 2011: 68). One of my two colleagues on the original Training Institute staff, Dick Harmon, has written about Alinsky organizing in the 1970s:

Our operating assumptions were that you didn’t ask basic questions about the economy because that would label you a “pinko,” an ideologue, and worse. If you raised these kinds of questions, the climate of the time would shut you down, so you had to be pragmatic. . . . We had no ongoing, fundamental analysis of the economy, no long-term diagnosis. No one was asking about alternatives to all the companies moving to the South, Latin America, Asia. We didn’t have any alternative except, just keeping building organizations (Schutz and Miller, eds., 2015: 208-209).

Dick Harmon also commented that there was no consideration within the Alinskyan community that “Corporate capitalism is One system, a Whole, assaulting both human beings and the rest of the natural world” (Schutz and Miller, 2015, eds.: 212-213).

Every one of these criticisms could be made of the CIO organizing inspired by John L. Lewis, mentor of his admiring acolyte, Saul Alinsky, who in turn employed and influenced Chavez.

The transmission of John L. Lewis-style organizing strategy from Lewis to Chavez was by way of a man named Fred Ross, “one of the first people on Alinsky’s payroll, and an early practitioner of Alinsky-style community organizing.” According to Bardacke,

Chavez watched Ross work and was watched by him, he filed weekly and sometimes daily reports to Ross and Alinsky’s Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). He studied [Alinsky’s] Reveille for Radicals. He read and reread Alinsky’s 1949 biography of John L. Lewis During Alinsky’s regular visits to California, which often lasted several weeks, Chavez worked alongside the master in formal trainings, conferences, and fundraising events (Bardacke, 2011: 68).

Alinsky, Bardacke (2011: 68-69) sums up, signed “both Fred Ross’s and Cesar Chavez’s checks.”

The editors of a recent collection of writings about Alinsky concede that within the farmworkers’ organization that Chavez created and led,

internal purges eliminated from the staff many talented and dedicated organizers, while others quietly resigned in protest. The boycott became the principal strategic weapon of the union; on-the-ground organizing of farmworkers at workplaces was shunted to the sidelines. Power increasingly was concentrated in the hands of Cesar Chavez, who brooked no internal opposition “from below”—i.e., from among farmworkers—and vigorously worked to defeat leaders whose views were different from his own (Schultz and Miller, eds., 2015: 106-107).

The authors of this critique add a criticism that has also been expressed by Marshall Ganz and others, namely, that Chavez insisted on appointing the members of local ranch committees rather than permitting them to be elected, and opposed the creation of local unions of farmworkers with the result that “[e]verything was run from union headquarters.” Chavez was also “vigorously anti-Communist, no matter what kind of Communist you happened to be” (Schultz and Miller, eds.: 108-109, 111). And in his zeal to protect the jobs of Hispanics already in the United States, Chavez did not hesitate to inform agencies of the federal government about the identities and whereabouts of undocumented new arrivals from Latin America.

Pioneer of an Alternative: A.J. Muste

I invite the reader to compare the top-down style of union and community organizing practiced by John L. Lewis, Saul Alinsky, and Cesar Chavez, with the style of work of strike organizer and labor school administrator, A. J. Muste.⁶ Muste grew up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a working-class city in which the major industry was making furniture. As a teenager, he worked in furniture factories during the summer.

Muste's initial ambition was to become a minister in the Dutch Reformed church. World War I caused him to become a fervent opponent of war. Refusing to abandon his newly-found pacifism, he was forced to give up his job as pastor of a Congregational church in Massachusetts.

There followed a period of unemployment and renewed search for a way fully to practice his faith. Nineteen-nineteen (1919) found him a member of a small group of friends who called themselves the Comradeship. Living together in a very cold apartment, they would rise early every morning, bundle themselves in their overcoats, and read the New Testament together. Under these circumstances, the group learned of an impending strike of textile workers in nearby Lawrence. The comrades went to check it out, and unexpectedly were asked to help lead the strike.

The work week at the Lawrence mills was 54 hours a week. Pay averaged \$11.00 a week. The strikers' basic demand was 54 hours pay for 48 hours' work. Among the 50,000 workers who went on strike, the only union organizations were a few craft locals of skilled loom fixers and spinners. The men in these locals were English, Scotch, and Irish. They had no contact with the "great mass of foreign-born workers."

A provisional strike committee was organized by middle-aged Belgian, Polish, and Italian weavers. Most of them spoke English "brokenly or not at all." The Comrades were invited to sit in on strike committee meetings. They went back to Boston every night to interpret the strike and to raise money in its support.

Muste was one of many who were beaten and jailed in the course of the strike. After several weeks of struggle, the strike was settled. The workers won a twelve percent increase in hour and piece rates, and recognition in all departments of shop committees, through which the union would have a voice in resolving grievances.

This strike victory became the credential on which Muste relied in creating the Brookwood Labor College, probably the most successful school for workers in American history. Deeply imbedded in workers' self-organization in the early 1930s, Muste and others from Brookwood played a crucial part in the initial direct actions that created many of the industrial unions later brought together in the CIO.

But Muste did not follow many of his close associates into work within the emerging CIO. There appear to have been several reasons for his decision.

First, he rejected the autocratic leadership of John L. Lewis. Like Roger Baldwin of the American Civil Liberties Union, Muste assisted as best he could efforts to give rank-and-file miners a voice in United Mine Workers' decision-making.⁷

A second reason Muste distanced himself from the emerging CIO appears to have been his belief in how workers and other oppressed groups educate themselves. Muste preferred to emphasize learning from experience as opposed to the attempt to force theory and predetermined decisions on others. He comments in his autobiography that Brookwood "did not have a body of economic and political doctrine to inculcate. We deliberately sought to stimulate intellectual controversy." Also, "as students and teachers we did not think of ourselves as temporarily withdrawn from the labor struggle, while preparing for future activity." To the extent possible, students and teachers at Brookwood acted out the ideas that they were learning together (Hentoff, ed., 1967: 107).

A third reason for Muste's chosen trajectory was his conviction, which proved to be correct, that the CIO leadership would uncritically support United States' involvement in the impending World War II.

Muste's third reason may seem strange to the American reader. I can imagine the response: why should a labor movement be concerned with the possibility of war?

The best answer to this question, it seems to me, is that in conference after conference before World War I, the labor and socialist parties of Europe declared that if war came, there would be a world-wide-general strike in opposition to the prospect of a bloodbath in which the workers of one nation killed the workers of another. True, most of the world's socialist parties abandoned this pledge when war actually broke out. Only a few individuals and small groups, such as the Bolsheviks in Russia, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in Germany, and Eugene Debs in the United States, publicly opposed the governments of their own countries. Muste aligned himself with this honorable tradition.

In our own lifetimes, the posture that Muste adopted toward war-making by the United States was formidably adopted by Howard Zinn.⁸ Where Muste anticipated the theme that United States intervention in World War II would be driven by the wish to seize and solidify its position as the world's leading capitalist economy, Zinn came to this conclusion from experience, after volunteering for military service and becoming a bombardier.

During World War II, Zinn was so eager to get into combat that he gave up a shipyard job that would have kept him safe for the duration, and arranged with his draft board to "volunteer for induction," even obtaining permission to mail his induction notice to himself. During flight training, he was similarly anxious to get to Europe, and twice "traded with other bombardiers to get on the short list for overseas."

Zinn tells us in his autobiography how and why his outlook began to change during his military service.

Zinn had made friends with a gunner in another crew, who, like himself, read books and was interested in politics. One day his friend said, "You know, this is not a war against fascism. It's an imperialist war." Startled, Zinn responded, "Then why are you here?" and his friend replied, "To talk to guys like you." Two weeks later his friend's plane was shot down and the whole crew killed.

Then when the war was almost over, the briefing officer said that they were going to bomb a French town named Royan. A few thousand German soldiers had retreated to Royan. They weren't fighting, just waiting for the war to end. The planes in Zinn's squadron were not going to carry their usual load but, instead, carried thirty one-hundred-pound canisters of "jellied gasoline." The town of Royan was decimated, the many victims French as well as German. Only long after the war did Zinn recognize that this was an early use of napalm.

At the time of his discharge, Zinn spontaneously wrote on the folder in which he kept papers concerning his military service, "Never again."

Muste's summary of his own reasoning was as follows. "Brookwood might have survived," he wrote,

might have been supported by the unions born under the New Deal and become a flourishing CIO training school. . . . I would still have been out of it. To have become identified with the New Deal, with the CIO top leadership and, presently, with support of the war—this would have been for me the abandonment of my deepest convictions and the collapse of inner integrity (Hentoff, ed., 1967: 152-153).

What is left of the labor movement in the United States, and we ourselves, face choices similar to those confronted by A. J. Muste.

Muste contended that the labor movement must retain and strengthen its idealism, its distinctive laborite vision that keeps it from becoming beholden to “capitalist culture.” Anyone who has spent time in a working-class community will immediately think of examples. There are the families who say of themselves, “we don’t cross picket lines.” There is the subtle but all-important understanding that the experience of solidarity in action, not ideology, comes first.

Marty Glaberman expressed it this way. Say you are working at your machine and see a group of fellow workers heading down the aisle in your direction. There are too many of them to be going to the tool crib. It is too early for lunch. Their procession can mean only one thing, and so you turn off your machine; put your tools in the tool box and lock it; wipe your hands; and join the line on its way to the door. Only when you get outside do you turn to your fellows and say, “What the hell is going on?”⁹

Glaberman was close to the revolutionary black workers in Detroit in the early 1970s. Wildcats were so frequent that, as Marty told it, “an optimist was a person who brought his lunch to work in the belief that he would still be inside the plant at lunch time.”

In this same spirit, in the Auto-Lite strike in Toledo led by Muste and other like thinkers, unemployed workers, despite their own need for work, refused to scab and joined the picket lines of the striking workers (see Zietlow and Pope: 256-258).

Conclusion

I have tried to understand what happened to the radicalism of the CIO. Unlike many other scholars, I find deficient the top-down unionism of John L. Lewis, and of others who advocated Lewis’ policies (like Saul Alinsky) or who implemented Lewis’ policies in other unions (like Cesar Chavez). Lewis had imposed on the United Mine Workers a cluster of related practices: a single union as exclusive bargaining representative; systematic hostility to direct action on the shop floor unless approved by the national union; the dues check-off; and management prerogative and no-strike clauses in the contract. UMW staff men like Philip Murray and Van Bittner carried these practices into the new CIO unions with financing from the UMW.

I counter-pose the approach of A.J. Muste. Muste helped to lead the cotton textile strike of 1919 to victory, then founded the Brookwood Labor School—probably the most radical and effective school for workers in American history—and finally was a leader of the Auto-Lite strike in Toledo, one of the trio of local general strikes in 1934 (Minneapolis, San Francisco, Toledo) that frightened the employing class and Congress into accepting the more top-down, bureaucratic form of trade unionism represented by the CIO. I contend that Muste’s concept of union organizing was based on **shared values**, on the **practice of solidarity**, and on the extraordinary notion that **an injury to one is an injury to all**. I believe that only if the labor movement can return to these values and practices can it be rebuilt.

References

- Anthony, Donald. 1942. "Rubber Products: With a Specific Reference to the Akron Area" in Harry A. Mills, ed., *How Collective Bargaining Workers: A Survey of Experience in Leading American Industries*. New York: Twentieth Century Fund.
- Bardacke, Frank. 2011. *Trampling out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers*. London and New York: Verso.
- Borsos, John. 1992. "Ironing Out Chaos: The CIO-ization of the United Rubber Workers, 1933-1941," unpublished manuscript in author's possession.
- Brecher, Jeremy. 2014. *Strike!* Revised, expanded and updated version. Oakland: PM Press.
- Brody, David. 1980. "John L. Lewis" in *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brooks, Robert R.R. 1940. *As Steel Goes...: Unionism in a Basic Industry*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Casebeer, Kenneth M. 1987. "Holder of the Pen: Interview with Leon Keyserling on Drafting the Wagner Act." *University of Miami Law Review*, Vol. 42, No. 2.
- Chomsky, Noam. 2005. *Chomsky on Anarchism*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.
- Cohen, Lizabeth. 1990. *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Daniel, Cletus E. 1980. *The ACLU and the Wagner Act: An Inquiry into the Depression-Era Crisis of American Liberalism*. Ithaca: New York State School in Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University.
- Danielson, Leilah. 2014. *American Gandhi: A.J. Muste and the History of Radicalism in the Twentieth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Glaberman, Martin. 2002. *Punching Out & Other Writings*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company.
- Green, James. 2015. *The Devil Is Here in These Hills: West Virginia's Coal Miners and Their Battle for Freedom*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Hentoff, Nat, ed. 1967. *The Essays of A.J. Muste*. Indianapolis, New York and Kansas City: Bobbs-Merrill Company.
- Kozura, Michael. 1996. "We Stood Our Ground: Anthracite Miners and the Expropriation of Corporate Property, 1930-41" in Lynd, ed., 1996: 199-237.

Lynd, Alice and Staughton Lynd, eds. 2011. *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers*, updated edition. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Lynd, Staughton.

--- 1996. "Introduction" to Lynd, ed., 1996: 1-26.

--- 2014. *Doing History from the Bottom Up: On E.P. Thompson, Howard Zinn and Rebuilding the Labor Movement from Below*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Lynd, Staughton, ed. 1996. *"We Are All Leaders": The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Montgomery, David. 1987. *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Morris, Charles J. 2005. *The Blue Eagle at Work: Reclaiming Democratic Rights in the American Workplace*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Nyden, Philip W. 1984. *Steelworkers Rank and File: The Political Economy of a Union Reform Movement*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey.

Pope, James Gray. 2003. "The Western Pennsylvania Coal Strike of 1933, Part I: Lawmaking from Below and the Revival of the United Mine Workers." *Labor History*, Vol. 44, No. 1.

Robinson, Ann Ooiman. 1981. *Abraham Went Out: A Biography of A.J. Muste*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Sargent, John. 2011. "Your Dog Don't Bark No More" in Alice Lynd and Staughton Lynd, eds. *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers*, updated edition. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Schatz, Ronald W. 1983. *The Electrical Workers: A History of Labor at General Electric and Westinghouse, 1923-60*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Schutz, Aaron and Mike Miller, eds. 2015. *People Power: The Community Organizing Tradition of Saul Alinsky*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

Scipes, Kim. 2003. "Trade Union Development and Racial Oppression in Chicago's Steel and Meatpacking Industries, 1933-1955. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Illinois at Chicago.

White, Ahmed. 2016. *The Last Great Strike: Little Steel, the CIO, and the Struggle for Labor Rights in New Deal America*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Woods, Sylvia. 2011. "You Had to Fight for Freedom" in Lynd and Lynd, eds.: 118.

Zietlow, Rebecca E. and James Gray Pope. 2017. "The Toledo Auto-Lite Strike of 1934 and the Fight Against "Wage Slavery" in Kenneth M. Casebeer, ed., *American Labor Struggles and Law Histories*, 2nd edition. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.

-
- 1 Kenneth Casebeer interviewed Leon Keyserling, principal draftsman of the National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act). Casebeer asked whether there was a specific reason that the Wagner Act includes Section 13, which reads as originally passed: “Nothing in this Act shall be construed so as either to interfere with or impede or diminish in any way the right to strike.” Keyserling replied: “There was a definite reason. First, because Wagner was always strong for the right to strike, which was labor’s ultimate weapon, they really had no other weapon. That guarantee was a part of his thinking. It was particularly necessary because a lot of people made the argument that because the government was giving labor the right to bargain collectively, that was a substitute for a right to strike, which was utterly wrong” (Casebeer, 1987: 353).
 - 2 Jeremy Brecher writes of the 1937 contract between General Motors and the UAW that ended the pivotal sit-down strike in Flint, Michigan that the union pledged that there would be “no suspension or stoppages of work . . . without the approval of the international officers of the union.” Union organizers and representatives were warned that they would be dismissed if they authorized any stoppages without the consent of the international officers. Lewis stated bluntly: “A C.I.O. contract is adequate protection against sit-downs, lie-downs, or any other kind of strike” (Brecher, 2014: 195-197, 199).
 - 3 This is being written in Spring 1917, and there are some indications that the National Labor Relations Board may recognize members-only unionism. In a case called *Children’s Hospital and Research Center of Oakland*, 364 NLRB No. 114 (2016), Member Hirozawa concluded that there is no requirement that a union be a section 9(a) exclusive representative for an employer to have a duty to bargain under section 8(a)(5).
 - 4 My wife Alice Lynd and I found that in interviewing veterans of the 1930s, the single explanation of the CIO’s decline most favored by these old-timers was the introduction of the dues check-off. Their memory was that when the shop steward had to collect dues by hand he or she also got an earful about rank-and-file complaints.
 - 5 See, especially, Chomsky’s essay “Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship” that focus on revolutionary Spain (Chomsky, 2005: 40-75).
 - 6 The following account of A.J. Muste is based on Hentoff, ed., 1967, and two biographies, Robinson (1981), and Danielson (2014).
 - 7 For the ACLU’s deep involvement in the struggles of rank-and-file workers in the 1930s, see Daniel (1980).
 - 8 Citations for this account of the evolution of Howard Zinn’s attitude toward his country’s wars will be found in Lynd (2014: 22-25).
 - 9 I base this and the anecdote that follows on conversations with Glaberman as I was preparing the edition of his work (see Glaberman, 2002: 22-25).