

Finding a Usable Past for the American Labour Movement's Decline

Erik Loomis

Volume 74, Fall 2014

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1060933ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this note

Loomis, E. (2014). Finding a Usable Past for the American Labour Movement's Decline. *Labour / Le Travail*, 74.

REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Finding a Usable Past for the American Labour Movement's Decline

Erik Loomis

Lisa Phillips, *A Renegade Union: Interracial Organizing and Labor Radicalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012)

Jennifer Luff, *Commonsense Anticommunism: Labor and Civil Liberties between the World Wars* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012)

Daniel Katz and Richard A. Greenwald, eds. *Labor Rising: The Past and Future of Working People in America* (New York: The New Press, 2012)

IN RECENT YEARS, HISTORIANS have turned their attention to the American labour movement's decline, a significant change in the historiographical arc of the field. Scholars cite many reasons for the movement's struggles: globalization and capital mobility; the ideological war against organized labour by neoliberals and conservatives; labour rejecting radicalism after World War II; the bureaucratic business unionism of George Meany and Lane Kirkland that proved unable to adjust to political and economic change; and the challenge of civil rights and feminism that broke down a white supremacist and patriarchal American working class. Recent major publications such as Jefferson Cowie's *Stayin' Alive*, Joseph McCartin's *Collision Course*, and Frank Bardacke's *Trampling Out the Vintage* all tell stories of organized labour empowering workers but also struggling to adjust to changes in American society that help lay the groundwork for the problems of today's movement.¹

1. Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010), Joseph McCartin, *Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike that Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), Frank Bardacke, *Trampling Out the Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers* (London and New York: Verso, 2012).

This same mood dominated the 2013 Labor and Working-Class History Conference in New York, where the increasingly clear new consensus calls industrial unionism an anomaly in US history, suggests that the 21st century better reflects the pre-Depression era workplace, and urges historians to cast their eyes away from the classic industrial strikes that characterized the mid-20th century and toward long-ignored labour struggles. Belief that the AFL-CIO can lead labour out of the morass seems limited, with hopes instead pinned on alternative labour organizations, unions not affiliated with the AFL-CIO or Change to Win, and grassroots organizing wherever it is found. The conference's plenary session, entitled "Looking Forward: New Directions and Strategies for Labor," did not include one single voice from a major established union except opening remarks by former UNITE-HERE president John Wilhelm. Notably, the session did feature a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) campaign to organize fast food restaurant chains Starbucks and Jimmy John's; although these campaigns remain small and largely unsuccessful, organizing those workplaces ignored by the established labour unions has become the hope of many activists, journalists, and scholars. They place great and often unreasonably optimistic hopes on every new movement of economic resistance, whether mass protests like Occupy Wall Street, insurgent unionism such as the Chicago Teachers Union, or – at the time of writing – strikes by fast food workers.

Each of the three books under review provides significant insight on using the past to understand organized labour's present state, seeking new answers about how the movement declined, and exploring possible paths forward. These books reconsider questions about the relationship between political radicalism and organized labour. They move the scholarship away from the big industrial unions such as United Auto Workers and United Steelworkers toward smaller unions that deployed alternative organizing models that may have greater relevance for today's workers. The books also edge toward a new synthesis, one of a great working-class struggle, but one that, outside of a short outlier period in the mid-20th century, has largely failed.

Lisa Phillips' *A Renegade Union* calls the success of the industrial-based unions of the CIO an aberration within the larger trajectory of American labour history. Instead, she sees a useful past in the New York garment industry's Local 65, a communist-led union that organized workers in small warehouses across the city beginning in the 1930s. The larger garment unions ignored workers in the city's "dead end shops" until Local 65 organizer and wholesale shop worker Arthur Osman recruited them into the union he and his co-workers created, helping to fight racial discrimination, win wage increases, and create a health insurance plan and pension. Phillips details how, over the next two decades, the union negotiated the tricky terrain of race, a spatially dispersed workforce, redbaiting attacks, and raids from rival unions. In the process, they provided lessons on both the potential and limitations of insurgent unionism in the United States.

Unlike the giant shop floors that facilitated industrial organizing, Local 65 members worked in dozens of small shops across New York City. The geography of New York's textile industry made the kind of shop-floor culture that facilitated CIO organizing impossible. This forced Osman and his organizers to bring together workers from dozens of shops into a union that sought to mobilize workers for widespread political, social, and racial change, the type of organizing that appeals to many labour activists today. Phillips writes that the non-factory base of these workers "resembles the struggles people are living through in the first part of the twenty-first century." (3)

The similarities between past and present are also reflected in the ethnic diversity of Local 65's membership. As in the diverse service sector today, the union had to organize Italians, African Americans, and other ethnic groups with long-standing racial tensions and little social interaction. The cross-racial solidarity that developed and the union's outsider and radical status allowed workers to define themselves in new ways. They were able to develop an alternative vision of social change based around mutual solidarity that led to a struggle against racial discrimination and for civil rights and workplace justice. Local 65 took on the employers' racist hiring practices by repeatedly sending more African Americans until the bosses caved. It sought to expand its reach to the southern US with some success after the failure of Operation Dixie, explicitly rejecting the CIO strategy of ameliorating whites and seeking to create contracts with enough benefits for Black workers to convince whites to join the union in their own self-interest. All of this helped the union develop close relationships with civil rights organizations, although the NAACP kept their distance until Local 65 rejected communism in the 1950s.

The growth of the low-wage and service sector workforce today leads Phillips to encourage readers to look at the IWW as a more useful model for the present than the CIO. Local 65 never fit the CIO's industrial model or the AFL's skilled labour model; in fact, she asserts that many communist union organizers during the 1930s would have been IWW members twenty years earlier. Local 65 affiliated with the CIO's United Retail and Wholesale Employees of America (URWEA). But the two organizations never had a close relationship, and, after World War II, the URWEA rebaited Local 65 out of the international. Expelled from the CIO in 1948, Osman and others union leaders found Local 65 could not survive outside of the federation because it faced constant raids from other unions, leading them to denounce communism and rejoin the CIO in 1954.

This union raiding from more moderate unions gets under Phillips' skin. She bemoans the Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) battle against the upstart United Health Care Workers in California. Comparing former SEIU president Andy Stern to the Cold War unionists that squashed Local 65's insurgency, Phillips notes that when organized labour was on the cusp of making enormous differences in the political landscape, the labour movement was "just as it had been in 1948 and 1950, off on the sidelines embroiled in inter-union disputes while anti-labor voices ... won important

political victories during the 2010 midterm elections.” (5–6) I’m not sure this is an entirely fair argument. First, SEIU’s distraction was not a major reason for Democratic losses. Second, should a union focus on the interests of its own members or on a national political game? Phillips’ own work suggests the former is more compelling. Third, union raiding and internal divisions may be unfortunate but have long been part of organized labour. While in an ideal world the task at hand would be organizing the masses, these struggles are also battles over the soul of unionism and what that represents for workers.

Local 65 may well offer useful lessons for the present, but I wonder about the limitations of its story. Phillips admitted that New York offered a “relatively unique context” for poor people working in small shops to fight for revolutionary changes in American life. (17) Although situated at the centre of American radicalism and in the most favourable period for successful organizing in American history, Local 65 essentially failed. Where Phillips sees the potential of radical unionism standing up to both class and race-based power, it had its shortcomings. Does such a union, which achieved at best moderate success in left-leaning New York, provide much of a guide for the rest of the United States? Local 65 also suggests the very limited windows for radicalism in US history and the enormous forces fighting against economic and racial insurgency. If radical community-based unionism like that of Local 65 struggled to survive in New York, will it play in Pittsburgh, Albuquerque, or Portland, not to mention Dallas or Oklahoma City? Is Local 65 a story of labour’s possibilities or a story of its limitations within the American context? Sadly, I believe the answer lies closer to the latter.

Phillips joins Randi Storch’s *Red Chicago*, Rosemary Feurer’s *Radical Unionism in the Midwest*, and Judy Stepan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlin’s *Left Out* as relatively recent books rethinking the role of communism in the labour movement that move beyond the polemics of the past.² Phillips tries to understand why the Communist Party appealed to rank and file union members and how communism shaped working-class organizations. Osman and Local 65 used communism to critique the economic system that made its members poor, a powerful tool in organizing people in those dead end shops. Local 65 officials remained CP members until the early 1950s, yet this did not reduce its effectiveness with most members. Ultimately, most rank and file Local 65 members simply did not find communism objectionable.

Jennifer Luff’s *Commonsense Anticommunism* is also a significant addition to this new literature on communism. Luff explores the shifting AFL policies toward communism and civil liberties between the world wars. During World War I, the AFL became the labour wing of the national vigilante network seeking to repress radicalism. The federation worked with the Bureau of

2. Randi Storch, *Red Chicago: American Communism at its Grassroots, 1928–35* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), Rosemary Feurer, *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900–1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), Judy Stepan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlin, *Left Out: Reds and America’s Industrial Unions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Investigation in the Justice Department to promote the Red Scare against its IWW opponents. Samuel Gompers lied about connections between the IWW and the German government and supported the Espionage Act. But as the Red Scare wound down, AFL leaders realized anti-free speech laws could be turned against "legitimate" labour unions. They responded by allying with civil liberties organizations such as the nascent American Civil Liberties Union. But this was an alliance of convenience that lasted only so long as the AFL believed it had the communists outflanked. Once the CIO and the communist organizers challenged AFL supremacy, the federation again abandoned free speech and supported a comprehensive government crackdown on radicals that threatened its control over the labour movement.

The book's centre lies in the AFL anticommunist strategy during the 1920s. Commonsense anticommunism meant monitoring and opposing communism but realizing it was not a serious threat. Luff argues the AFL knew more about American communism than nearly any organization, including the federal government. What it found was that the best way to fight communism was simply to let communists expose themselves to workers who would reject it. While many labour conservatives still worked with federal law enforcement, they committed to at least the rhetoric of civil liberties in order to protect their own position.

The strategy worked because of grassroots anticommunism fostered in the craft union hall. Communists alienated themselves from progressive unionists in the 1920s through their own poor political decisions and willingness to take directives from Moscow. With communism's revitalization among the American working class during the Great Depression and the CIO's challenge, the AFL turned from laissez-faire anticommunism and again urgently called for the government suppression of communists. The AFL, much to its discredit, worked closely with Martin Dies' House Un-American Activities Committee and even officially endorsed it in 1939. But importantly, individual workers also went to Dies with stories of communists taking over their unions and while some of this came from the frustration of politically ambitious unionists who found their path to power blocked by communist organizers, the anti-communism was also heartfelt and real. Internationals also engaged in brutal redbaiting campaigns to fight for the soul of their union or undermine industrial unionist rivals. In one of the most egregious instances, the International Association of Machinists urged the federal government to investigate its own local because the leadership feared the local wanted to defect to the UAW.

Luff and Phillips ultimately come to different conclusions on the role of communism in interwar unions. Whereas Phillips argues for the relevancy of a radical union that channeled working-class discontent to demand radical changes in society, Luff shows the real challenges that communists faced, not only because of their own political bumbling or AFL opposition, but also because working-class anticommunists had access to larger domestic political forces more than happy to suppress radical unionism. Luff has written a

significant addition to the growing literature on working-class conservatism, a literature with which all that hope for a more radical labour movement must contend. *Commonsense Anticommunism* deserves reading in context of such books as Lisa McGirr's *Suburban Warriors*, Becky Nicolaides' *My Blue Heaven*, and Catherine Rymph's *Republican Women*.³

Daniel Katz and Richard Greenwald's edited volume, *Labor Rising*, explicitly attempts to bridge the past and present in order to suggest ways forward for the labour movement. These 22 essays, written mostly by scholars but with a few by labour activists, also serve as a useful entryway into historiographical trends in labour history. The book largely succeeds, despite the inconsistencies typical of an edited volume. If historians point to many reasons for labour's decline, they suggest just as many paths to fixing those problems.

The book's best essays discuss past state interventions in the market to regulate labour, providing important historical precedents for the vision of state regulation that American labour has always needed to succeed. Leon Fink, summarizing the findings of his 2011 book *Sweatshops at Sea*, discusses a vital precedent for the state intervening in international labour conditions in the La Follette Seamen's Act of 1915 that granted the government the power to enforce US standards on any ship docking at an American port.⁴ Equally valuable is David Brody reminding readers of the successful history of labour law reform and urging a new round of it as an important goal for activists. Elizabeth Faue shows that unions did not simply rely on government during this era. Rather, they also publicized their own causes effectively, something that the movement struggles with today. Some find relevance in an even older history, such as Nelson Lichtenstein's essay comparing the anti-Walmart campaigns to anti-slavery campaigns before the Civil War, with both groups fighting against a merchant capitalism that empowers traders and financiers over commodity producers.

The growing consensus that the New Deal was an anomaly also ties together several essays. Jefferson Cowie argues that the powerful individualistic ideology in American society suggests organizing in the New Gilded Age might look more like the Progressive Era, when reformers empowered individuals to create change. Brody talks about the return to the days of the yellow-dog contract in an era where traditional organizing under the structure of the National Labor Relations Board is nearly impossible in the face of employer intimidation. Richard Greenwald reminds us in his overview of contingent

3. Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), Becky M. Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), Catherine E. Rymph, *Republican Women: Feminism and Conservatism from Suffrage through the Rise of the New Right* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

4. Leon Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea: Merchant Seamen in the World's First Globalized Industry, from 1812 to the Present* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

labour that the fundamental reality of work that underwrote the growth of mid-20th century unionism has been transformed, probably permanently.

Many of the essays take a wishful tone, arguing for cultural changes in labour that are much harder to create than new laws or regulations. A unifying theme throughout the essays is the need for organized labour to craft meaningful alliances with other progressive organizations. Andrew Ross makes the case for “eco-Keynesianism” and labour embracing climate justice. Michelle Chen writes of the need to reach out over the generation gap, “which is also in many cases a culture gap, education gap, and racial gap” (55) to embrace young people and youth culture. Ruth Milkman correctly states the immigrants are the future of organized labour and urges alliances with immigrant organizations. Dana Frank and Dorothy Fujita-Romy call for greater attention paid to alliances with international labour movements and the role of the US in oppressing workers abroad. Bill Fletcher urges organized labour to organize the unemployed. Kimberly Phillips reminds us how the American Dream has failed African Americans.

I agree wholeheartedly with the need for organized labour to transform itself and become a widespread force for a broader protest against inequality and injustice. But it remains difficult to see the mechanics of these alliances. The AFL-CIO convention worked hard at its 2013 convention to solidify alliances with groups such as the NAACP and Sierra Club. It recently signed an agreement with United Students Against Sweatshops, providing a potentially fruitful connection between established labour and young activists in an organization that has returned to prominence in the aftermath of Bangladesh’s Rana Plaza factory collapse that killed over 1,100 apparel workers. However, it is a lot easier to talk about these alliances than see them through. Many internationals have committed, with various degrees of seriousness, to alliances with environmentalists and to fight climate change, ideally with new jobs building a green infrastructure. The immediate fight over constructing the Keystone XL pipeline has exposed fractures within labour over these alliances. Laborers’ Union president Terry O’Sullivan has lambasted the Sierra Club for “betraying labor” by not supporting Keystone and the jobs it would create for his union’s members. He has also called out other unions for speaking out on a project that does not directly affect their membership. International Association of Fire Fighters president Harold Schaitberger has publicly warned labour against becoming the “American Federation of Progressive and Liberal Organizations.” Progressive labour activists cannot wish these unions and positions away any more than they can ignore Luff’s revelations about shop-floor anticommunism in the 1930s. As much as scholars who support organized labour want an inclusive labour movement that builds meaningful alliances, we also have to deepen our analysis of how to overcome the diversity of voices within labour that preclude a real commitment to them.

For a book that addresses labour’s future, it’s worth noting the lack of young voices in *Labor Rising*. Fink, Brody, Lichtenstein, Shelton Stromquist, and

Nancy McLean – these are all voices from which we expect and want to hear. But they are not the next generation of labour scholars, and in a book about the movement's future, some of the fresher ideas percolating through the scholarship would be welcome. Only three essays come from scholars untenured at the time of publication. This is telling, given that Bethany Moreton, Jacob Remes, and Mario Sifuentez provide some of the most useful and creative essays in the book.

Moreton, writing with Pamela Voekel, tells us to learn from the capitalist right and especially urges scholars working in universities to foster connections with insurgent student groups and build the next generation of activists. Sifuentez, writing with Matthew Garcia, compares the success of Oregon's Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noreste to the struggling United Farm Workers to understand how farmworker unionism has been transformed in recent decades. Meanwhile, Remes' essay on the aftermath of the 1917 Halifax munitions ship explosion has deep roots in anarchist thought. He sees disasters as a place where the state steps away and working-class democracy arises, arguing, "the state holds back a true flowering of humanity." (147) He urges the left to promote solidarity as its "quality value," (144) although "solidarity" is not sharply defined.

I expect to see a flowering of anarchist scholarship over the next decade – along the line of Remes – that reflects an Occupy era where young activists may not see the state as a useful tool in solving inequality and oppression. If the New Deal state was an anomaly and if people increasingly look away from the state for solutions, what is the future of the state and labour movement? These are not questions with which most labour historians have grappled. The crux of *Labor Rising* is the essays by Remes and Fink. Is the state an agent getting in the way of our everyday forms of solidarity? Or is the state the best tool we have to create change in the future? If the state can potentially create a race to the top, as Fink shows, should we advocate its marginalization, if not demise, for more esoteric forms of democracy and solidarity? On these questions, I expect to see a generation of labour scholarship arguing for variants of these ideas.

One not altogether positive revelation from *Labor Rising* demonstrates the difficulty historians have in prognosticating the future. Many of the book's essays were written in those few months after the Wisconsin uprising and before Occupy Wall Street. The spirit of Madison infuses them with hope. But many of the writers, so desperate for something to change the depressing course of the labour movement, clung to the Wisconsin uprising as a new day. As this was clearly not to be the case, several essays in a book only a year old already feel dated. It's both a strength and weakness of the field that its scholars are also activists. Shelton Stromquist writes, "we have them right where we want them!" (23) because of the growth of grassroots activism around the country. No we don't. It's rather the opposite in the age of the Koch Brothers and Citizens United and the Tea Party. David Brody wrote that the Madison

uprising had brought collective bargaining rights back into the public consciousness. There's not much evidence of that in late 2013. Michelle Chen writes that 2011 could mark a paradigm shift in labour, but after Wisconsin and Occupy, the situation looks little changed, at least for traditional unionism. Ultimately, *Labour Rising* feels more like a wish than a fact.

Each of the three books reviewed here add significantly to the historiography and suggest paths forward for organized labour. But ultimately, historians may not have a usable past to guide the labour movement out of its present doldrums. For all of the labour movement's stumbling over the past half-century, the real barrier faced by workers is a hostile state and a well-organized business community determined to keep it that way. Everything labour can do to build solidarity, promote alliances, organize the unorganized, and promote radical challenges to corporate capitalism mean little in the face of a corporate-state alliance seeking to roll back the gains made by labour over the past century. The real lesson of the past is the absolute necessity of a neutral state for workers to have a chance for a fair share of the pie. Until that again happens, it's hard to see an optimistic future for organized labour. That said, if you ask ten labour historians this same question, you are likely to get ten answers.