

# Labour in Capitalist America: Ideology, Bureaucracy, Insurgency

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# Labour in Capitalist America: Ideology, Bureaucracy, Insurgency

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Paul Buhle, *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland, and the Tragedy of American Labor* (New York: Monthly Review Press 1999).

Martin Glaberman and Seymour Faber, *Working for Wages: The Roots of Insurgency* (Dix Hills, NY: General Hall 1998).

Ted Morgan, *A Covert Life: Jay Lovestone, Communist, Anti-Communist, and Spymaster* (New York: Random House 1999).

Mike Parker and Martha Gruelle, *Democracy is Power, Rebuilding Unions from the Bottom Up* (Detroit: Labor Notes 1999).

AS THE DUST of the “collapse of communism” has had about a decade to settle, and the often bewildering realities of the new millennium engulf us, a proliferation of problems and studies suggest the truth of an old assertion of Jean-Paul Sartre. *Marxism remains* “the philosophy of our time,” because the conditions that brought it into being — the dynamic and incredibly creative/destructive realities of capitalism — continue to be the framework within which we live.

A majority of us continue to make our living by selling our ability to work to employers for a paycheck, which Karl Marx defined as the typical proletarian condition in capitalist society. According to Martin Glaberman and Seymour Faber, “the workplace in capitalist society is essentially an authoritarian structure.” They go on to quote Marx that “in proportion as capital accumulates, the lot of the laborer, be his [or her] payment high or low, must grow worse.... Accumulation of wealth at one end is the accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole, i.e., on the side of the class that produces its own product in the form of capital.” Such a description must have the vibrant

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ring of truth for a majority of blue collar and white collar workers today. Demonstrating the interconnection between the writings of the young and mature Marx, Glaberman and Faber use the term alienation to describe these de-humanizing effects of capitalism on the working-class majority. They suggest that "it is the continuing inability of capitalism significantly to mitigate the extent of alienation in the work process that seems to assure the continuance of working-class resistance and struggle."

Far beyond this "fundamentalist" stress on the condition and struggles of the proletariat at "the point of production," the contributions of Marx and those identifying with his outlook have had a profound impact down to the present day among philosophers, anthropologists, economists, literary critics, sociologists, historians, political scientists, culture critics, and others — much to the annoyance of conservatives and neo-conservatives (especially strident ex-Marxists) who insist that Marxism is dead. But the books under review fit into the proliferation of "labour studies" which connect with the class-struggle aspect of the Marxist paradigm.

One of the best volumes in this proliferation of labour studies is the one from which we have already been quoting. Produced by two aging labour educators with considerable personal experience in working-class occupations and labour radicalism, it is well-researched, wide-ranging yet succinct, clearly written and thoughtful, and in many ways both challenging and persuasive. In short, it is a fine introductory text for those interested in the modern-day working class. In *Working for Wages: The Roots of Insurgency*, Martin Glaberman and Seymour Faber offer an interdisciplinary approach — blending economics, sociology, political science, philosophy — in an effort to comprehend "the working class as a whole." At the same time, they seek to provide something new:

This book is designed to fill a gap in studies of the American working class — to examine the sources of insurgency. The tendency of academic studies of the working class has been to fragment those studies in ways that emphasize conflicts within the working class and, as a result, often confirm popular belief that working people fundamentally support the status quo. In this book we try to seek out those elements of work in capitalist society that induce resistance to the society in one form or another.

Actually, their view is that the working class does more than simply "resist" oppressive aspects of capitalism. The workplace is the site of contending forces: the employers constantly seek to increase profits at the expense of the workers through authoritarian, dehumanizing and exploitative practices, while the workers constantly seek to increase the amount of on-the-job dignity, creativity and community, and workplace democracy. "The conditions of life and work of the proletariat, Marx believed, would force the working class to behave in ways that would ultimately transform society," they stress. They point to a considerable amount of historical experience demonstrating the insurgent vitality of the working class: from the Paris Commune of 1871 and the St. Louis general strike (which they

mistakenly place in 1876 instead of 1877), to the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the US industrial upsurge of the 1930s, to the Hungarian uprising of 1956, the worker-student upsurge in France during 1968, to the Polish Solidarity movement of the 1980s. They conclude that "as long as the workplace is a place of continual struggle and conflict, then massive social explosions are always possible." What leaps out from this account, however, is that none of the inspiring examples of working-class insurgency can be said to have established the realm of economic freedom and workplace democracy (socialism) that Marx, Glaberman and Faber see as the ultimate end of the proletarian struggle.

In fact, it is precisely this central perspective of Marxism that appears to be in shambles at the dawn of the new millennium: the notion that a powerful economic-social-political movement of the working-class majority would arise, take power, and move humanity forward to a socialist future in which "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." Ted Morgan aptly elaborates on this perspective as it was understood by Jacob Liebstein, a radical young student from an immigrant working-class family, in the early 1900s:

His reading told him that, for the first time in the history of man, there were enough goods so that everyone could have a decent standard of living. There should thus be a social system that would distribute the goods and give everyone a fair share. It all seemed perfectly reasonable. Socialism was based on cooperation rather than competition and would lead to a society with no private ownership, where the lion's share of the wealth was not hoarded by a tiny number. Of the thinkers that Jacob studied, Marx had a great impact, for he posited not a utopian but a scientific communism. It seemed ordained that just as man had evolved from lower forms of life, he would rise through the class struggle to communism.

Emerging from the immigrant Jewish ghetto (which contained intense and influential clusters of socialist and anarchist radicalism) into the City College of New York, he was a leading activist in the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, connected with the flourishing multi-ethnic Socialist Party of America led by labour hero Eugene V. Debs. Like many young radicals of his generation, Liebstein was profoundly influenced by the Russian Revolution of 1917 which seemed to propel the world into precisely this direction. As he later explained: "In the first days of the October Revolution — that is the Bolshevik Revolution — the Russians were the leaders through prestige, through achievement, through the fact that they had conquered one sixth of the world for Socialism. We had an attitude of almost religious veneration for the Russian leaders." Changing his name to the more "American" Jay Lovestone, he joined with others to create the Communist Party of America.

The title of Ted Morgan's illuminating biography is a reasonable summary of Lovestone's story — *A Covert Life, Jay Lovestone: Communist, Anti-Communist, and Spymaster*. Lovestone's later incarnation as the architect of the Cold War anti-Communist foreign policy predominant in the US labour movement from the

late 1940s through the 1970s, intimately intertwined with the global covert machinations of the US State Department and Central Intelligence Agency, is thoroughly documented in this very readable, though relatively uncritical, volume. But the earlier experiences and ideals of the young Lovestone are not slighted. Morgan's comments on links between the left-wing Lovestone and the Cold War spymaster are insightful and worth quoting at length:

Lovestone himself had become a divided being. The man of principle had joined the party because he believed in the example of the Bolshevik Revolution, which could, he thought, be adapted to the United States to form a classless, more equitable society. Industries would be in the hands of the workers instead of the fat cats. Farmers would receive price supports for their crops. The downtrodden, including the Negroes, would get a fair shake. All these fine notions were forgotten once he was in the party and caught up in its power struggles. Instead, circumstances made him develop into an adept infighter, changing him in ways that were not altogether pleasant. He had become more conspiratorial, more suspicious of those around him. He had plenty of opportunity to employ his natural talent for sarcasm and invective and to hone his dialectical skills. The Communist faction fights of the twenties were not exactly character-building, though for the youthful Lovestone they proved to be formative.

As a young activist he was "brash and self-assured, quick-witted and outgoing," as well as "an obvious go-getter," according to Morgan. But even as a leader in the factional struggles within the early Communist movement, Lovestone displayed a youthful cynicism toward his own comrades, whom he referred to (when encountering opposition) as "a cesspool of nuts," and "the rank and vile," and "the rank and filth." One female comrade commented: "My own deep feeling about you is that you would be far more effective and have a greater following if you could make yourself be more human, less bitter (it's that deep-seated bitterness of yours that often frightens me)."

The young Lovestone was definitely attracted to power. "I know every one of our boys is solid with Stalin," he asserted proudly when the United Opposition of Trotsky and Zinoviev in the Communist International sought to challenge the rise of the bureaucratic dictatorship. Comparing the dictator with his intellectual ally Nikolai Bukharin (with whom Lovestone and his followers felt some kinship), he commented that Stalin "talks little and does much. The difference between Stalin and Bukharin is that Bukharin is more of an abstract, philosophical polemicist, while Stalin is sharp, concise." (A parallel suggests itself between Joseph Stalin and George Meany in Lovestone's appreciation for the powerful, no-nonsense union bureaucrat.)

When Stalin turned against Bukharin, it was Lovestone who presented a resolution to the US Communist Party denouncing his ill-fated intellectual friend. But when Stalin also turned unambiguously and brutally against Lovestone's own policies in the American Communist movement in 1929, the young leader made an

unrealistic decision to challenge the Communist International's supreme authority. Stalin scornfully (and more or less accurately) told the handful of Lovestone followers that no one in the Communist movement would follow them except their own wives and sweethearts.

The story of the left-wing group that Lovestone led — first called the Communist Party Majority, then more realistically the Communist Party Opposition, and finally the Independent Labor League — receives sketchy but interesting treatment in Morgan's biography. The author comments: "In the thirties he played a rather self-serving double game, attacking the American Communist Party while trying to ingratiate himself with Stalin. The time finally came when he could no longer swallow Stalin's government by terror, and he dismantled his movement, having learned that nothing can be accomplished without the backing of a powerful organization." Morgan aptly summarizes Lovestone's dilemma at the opening of the 1940s: "Ten years in the Communist Party, ending in expulsion. Another twelve years trying to get his own party off the ground, a failed attempt to take over the United Auto Workers, and now disbandment. Where could he go?"

The solution was provided by the fact that during the 1930s some of Lovestone's followers, led by Charles (Sasha) Zimmerman, had secured control of International Ladies Garment Workers Union Local 22 and become closely allied with ILGWU chieftain David Dubinsky. A moderate socialist turned ex-socialist, by 1941 Dubinsky was able to say of Lovestone to fellow anti-Communist leaders in the AFL: "The son of a bitch is okay, he's converted."

In a similar manner, old Sam Gompers had "converted" many years before. Lovestone's trajectory reflects the much broader and deeper trend documented in Paul Buhle's splendid history, *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland, and the Tragedy of American Labor*, a study rich in factual detail and challenging interpretation.

A Marxist influence had been present at the very inception of the modern US labour movement. The preamble to the constitution adopted at the founding convention of the American Federation of Labor (1886) declared: "A struggle is going on, in all the nations of the civilized world, between the oppressors and the oppressed of all countries, a struggle between the capitalist and the laborer, which grows in intensity from year to year, and will work disastrous results to the toiling millions, if they are not combined for mutual protection and benefit."

The Federation's first President was Samuel Gompers, an Anglo-Dutch-Jewish immigrant destined to head the AFL over four decades until his death in 1926. As Buhle notes, in the 1870s young cigar maker Sam Gompers had come into contact with "self-taught workers, and he "then read the *Communist Manifesto*, learned the gospel of unionism from First International veterans, and believed, at least for a time, in a great socialistic future for the world's peoples."

Yet Gompers went on to help develop a trade unionism of the "pure and simple" variety, sometimes called "bread and butter unionism" — or, more to the

point, "business unionism." This orientation accepted the capitalist system while fighting to improve the conditions of workers within that system — focusing with a legendary "practical-mindedness" on winning higher wages, shorter hours, and better working conditions while fighting to keep radical politics out of the union. As Dubinsky would later put it: "Trade unionism needs capitalism like a fish needs water." One problem with this approach was its willingness to sell out less of fortunate workers for the benefit of those more easily organized into unions.

In the time of Gompers this meant advancing the interests of skilled craft workers (cigar makers, carpenters, plumbers, etc.) at the expense of the less skilled industrial workers. It also meant considering "labour" in narrow terms: white males who had not recently immigrated to the United States. Despite idealistic rhetorical flourishes, the AFL leadership of Gompers did not seek to organize all unorganized workers, but was inclined to exclude women, people of color, and immigrants from southern and eastern Europe from the job markets in which the Federation's dominant craft unions existed. The racist element of this exclusionism came out more than once, for example in Gompers' 1905 comment that "we are not going to let the standard of living be destroyed by Negroes, Chinamen, Japs or others."

Employing the research and interpretation of Timothy Messer-Kruse in *The Yankee International: Marxism and the American Reform Tradition, 1848-1876*, Buhle places much of the blame for this development on Marxism itself, especially as it was represented by Marx's closest US co-thinkers in the old International Workingmen's Association (the First International) such as Friedrich Sorge. The traditional interpretation of labour historians has seen Sorge and his comrades as uncompromising and practical-minded working-class activists battling against naive reform-minded Yankees who were bent on drawing the First International into their own outlandish fads, fuzzy-mindedness, and bourgeois politics. With only slight distortion, the new interpretation could be summarized as one that sees a battle between dogmatic Marxists emphasizing a narrowly-conceived class approach, exclusive trade unionism, and economic determinism against premature postmodernist radicals who emphasized identity politics, social movements, and cultural concerns. The intensifying competition between the AFL and the more expansive, inclusive Knights of Labor in the 1880s is seen by both interpretations as a further reflection of this conflict — with a replay of "pure and simple" narrowness being the AFL bureaucracy's role in fighting against and helping the government and employers to defeat the "Wobbly" militants of the Industrial Workers of the World during the second decade of the 20th century.

Perhaps a more dialectical way of viewing the matter would be to reach for the element of truth in each interpretation by considering the relevance of the Hegelian concept "negation of the negation." It is possible that the hallmarks of the early AFL approach (a narrowed economic/class focus and emphasis on practical organizational questions) were essential for the forward movement of the labour movement of that time, necessitating a rejection of the more free-wheeling radicalism charac-

terizing the opponents of “Marxists” and AFL pioneers. But as Buhle and others have also demonstrated, if the labour movement was to be true to itself, later developments necessitated a rejection of this rejection — a radical expansion of the vision and organizational scope of the labour movement, blending together the struggle against class, ethnic, racial, and gender oppression while at the same time blending together a tough-minded approach to organization with increasingly radical goals.

In fact, Gompers and his collaborators fiercely resisted any such “negation of the negation.” This resistance was actually inconsistent with the tough-minded economic realism that had been the justification for the initial AFL “narrowness.” Buhle notes that “as continued improvements in mechanization gradually (in some cases not so gradually) undercut the craft worker, AFL leaders had to choose strategically between an all-inclusive movement and a circle-the-wagons movement of relatively privileged workers, the ‘aristocracy of labor.’”

As old man Gompers lay dying, the union leader who would represent the latter-day triumph of his “business union” orientation was being nurtured in the New York building trades. In the 1920s George Meany, “a youngster not conspicuously bright or mechanically talented,” began his rise in the bureaucracy of the plumbers union, envisioning “an escape from a lifetime of manual labor, mounting bills, and responsibilities,” according to Buhle. “He felt intuitively at home in the tradition of Gompers, a man he both studied and admired.” This included “a deep prejudice toward unskilled workers at large, and people of color and women in particular, as being unsuited to form or sustain ‘real,’ meaning craft, unions... Meany’s mental division of ‘us’ — white male workers — and ‘them’ (everyone else) had served him well in the eras of uncontested craft privilege.”

Buhle’s talent for sweeping and well-phrased generalizations graphically links the narrowed scope of “pure and simple” unionism with its bureaucratic corruption:

Inflated salaries, large expense accounts, nepotism, and ostentatiousness indicated and reinforced, from Gompers’ time to the Meany era and beyond, the wall that divides union officialdom from the rank-and-file. A bureaucratic, self-perpetuating ruling group within trade unionism, with its own ideological pretensions, interests, and rewards, had expanded rapidly and fattened measurably. Below, members grew steadily more alienated not only from the “efficient” and “automated” corporate workplace but also from what was theoretically “their” union. Samuel Gompers had presided over the gestation of American labor autocracy; George Meany strengthened its reign; Lane Kirkland would wear out the seat of power. The irony of the American worker reduced from subject to object in any organization based on his or her class is as old as the style fostered by Gompers, and, despite glamorized histories, typified even most of the CIO even in its best days. But this long-existent, internal bureaucratic encrustation stifling union democracy and the union movement proper were decisively widened and hardened through the rule of Meany and what can properly be called “Meanyism.”



And yet Gompers was somewhat different from such successors as Meany and Kirkland. Defending the old-time "pure and simple" unionism from persistent and increasing labour-radical, Socialist and Communist challenges, Gompers nonetheless fondly recalled his own left-wing mentors of the First International as "a group of the finest men it has ever been my good fortune to meet in any circle of life," who were able to "create the technique and formulate the fundamentals that guided trade unions to constructive policies and achievements." The intellectual hero of this circle (and of Gompers in his 1925 autobiography) was none other than Karl Marx, who emphasized "the necessity for organization of wage-earners in trade unions and the development of economic power prior to efforts to establish labour government through political methods," grasping "the principle that the trade union was the immediate and practical agency which could bring wage-earners a better life."

It is interesting to note that the "mature" Lovestone similarly was loath to condemn his bearded teacher. For years anti-Communists more conservative than Lovestone (from certain luminaries of the House Un-American Activities Committee to "top cop" J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation) harboured and expressed suspicions about his loyalty. "Only one thing they asked," a friend reported to him regarding some closed Congressional testimony in 1954, "if Lovestone ever renounced Marxism." Lovestone's response: "These formulas have lost their meaning. Marx analyzed eighteenth- and nineteenth-century capitalism brilliantly, but he didn't know a thing about the United States. And don't forget that Marx made the most powerful criticism of Russia. He warned against Russian reaction sweeping the world." Like Gompers, he seems to have seen himself as being closer to the method of Marx than were the Marxists whom he fought tooth and nail. Yet in all of this Lovestone and Gompers failed to give serious attention to the deeper workplace realities that such analysts as Glaberman and Faber insist are essential for comprehending both working-class life under capitalism and Marxism itself.

Of course, Lovestone's *forte* was the foreign policy of the AFL and later of the AFL-CIO, initially as the head of the Free Trade Union Committee. "Working behind the scenes and out of the limelight," according to biographer Morgan, "in an office in the ILGWU headquarters in New York with only a couple of assistants, he played a board game on the map of the world that made him one of the masterminds of the Cold War." The left-wing factionalist had come to believe, in Morgan's words, that "American free enterprise was the most powerful vehicle for the extension of democracy," especially as reformed by unions such as the ILGWU, while "in Russia 'the workers paradise,' labour was subjected to speedup systems and severely punished for infractions of factory discipline." (It is perhaps a measure of Lovestone's and his biographer's distance from workplaces in the United States that — unlike Glaberman and Faber — they could see such oppressive industrial realities so clearly only on the other side of the Cold War divide.)

Foreign policy was also a pet interest of both Gompers and Meany. From supporting US involvement in the imperialist slaughter of World War I and efforts to crush the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, to supporting US imperialist slaughter in Vietnam and efforts to crush Central American revolutions in the 1980s, the mainstream of the US labour movement was committed to help make the world safe for US free enterprise. For three decades, until he was shunted aside in 1974, Lovestone oversaw a multi-million dollar operation with the aid not only of comrades who had followed him in the various dissident Communist groups he had led, but also right-wing Social Democrats (including, by the 1960s, a talented cluster associated with ex-Trotskyist leader Max Shachtman). There were many left-wing labour struggles in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America that were effectively undermined and thwarted (sometimes with accompanying arrests and killings) by the intimate blend of CIA-related spying and “business union” operations of Lovestone and company. Morgan credits Lovestone with helping to keep the AFL-CIO lined up behind US policy in Vietnam, including the mobilization of thousands of hard-hats from New York’s building trades in a 1970 pro-Nixon demonstration that violently assaulted those protesting against the war.

Many of the younger moderate socialist and ex-socialist union staffers in the Meany-Kirkland milieu rather painlessly transformed themselves into neo-conservative functionaries in the Reagan-Bush administration and right-wing think-tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute in the 20th century’s final two decades. Lovestone himself, on the other hand, never felt entirely at peace with political domination by the corporate capitalist élite. Biographer Morgan logs his complaints. “Ike never sees anyone in the academic and labor world — it is all big business,” Lovestone griped in 1953. Regarding Reagan (whom he predicted “future historians will rate...as somewhat below Millard Filmore,” and who “suffers from an incurable god complex”), Morgan tells us that “Lovestone was tempted to write him a letter suggesting that in the long run it would be bad for him to be surrounded by rich men, who cared only about their personal profits.”

There are, in fact, significant indications in Morgan’s biography that Lovestone maintained a lifelong commitment to the cause of labour — as he had come to understand it. But the way he understood labour’s cause had become entangled with his own personal characteristics, drives, and needs — a phenomenon not uncommon in the labour movement. Indeed, a leader of Lovestone’s own left-wing group and editor of its newspaper, Will Herberg (who unfortunately is not even mentioned in Morgan’s book) referred to such things in a later book he wrote as an ex-Marxist theologian, *Judaism and Modern Man*. Referring to the corrupting impact of power in the labour movement, Herberg commented, without naming names, on “an element of self-seeking, hidden from himself though it may have been, in the idealist whose leadership in the cause served so frequently to inflate his pride and extend his power over his fellow-men.”

Attention to psychological dynamics is necessary but not sufficient for explaining the bureaucratic conservatism that has historically characterized the dominant labour leaderships in the United States, and the pattern of de-radicalization that we see with Gompers, Lovestone, and many others. We can find the pattern in the US labour movement as a whole: in the militant upsurge of industrial unionism which saw the birth of the Congress of Industrial Organizations during the 1930s, "labor had once spoken for the lowly and had gathered unto itself the idealists in society at large," as Paul Buhle puts it. "Even during the early Cold War decades, unions were proudly liberal, loyal to the social reform wing of the Democratic Party." But by the 1960s "AFL-CIO President George Meany emerged a sputtering, foul-mouthed conservative, a bloated public embarrassment perfectly suited for a newspaper cartoonists' ridicule."

Buhle largely attributes this development to the powerful economic and political influence of a dynamic and internationally expansionist corporate capitalism seeking to maximize profits and push back impediments to its profit-making. Central to this is crushing "idealistic labour movements" at home and abroad. As part of realizing this goal, corporate executives and their political representatives in the Democratic and Republican parties have tended to look with favor upon a Gompers who would seize opportunities "to legitimate a conservative and exclusionary style of unionism," as well as upon a Meany and a Kirkland seeking to "crush radicalism of all kinds at home and abroad." Thus "Gompers and his successors were less labor representatives than labor controllers." The function of labour bureaucracy is to thwart labour insurgency, which means that it is tolerated and even promoted by the imperial corporate system, and therefore "America's historic labor bureaucracy is ... finally and without doubt connected to the creation of empire."

The highly problematical aspect of this foreign policy orientation for union members and all workers in the United States is tartly noted by Glaberman and Faber. While heading the AFL-CIO, Lane Kirkland defended labour support for high-tariff protectionism by asserting that "policies of other countries that base their exports on the exploitation of human beings below the most meager levels and through the denial of trade union rights is the worst and most anti-human form of protectionism." Commenting that "support of Cold War policies has always ranked higher with American labor leaders than working-class solidarity," Glaberman and Faber point out that (under Lovestone and others) "the AFL-CIO has consistently supported the US State Department and the CIA in crushing militant labor organizations, especially in so-called Third World countries, where the wage differential with American workers matters most."

In fact, Glaberman and Faber — who make a major point of looking for and dealing with *contradictions* in the realities they examine — offer a more complex view than Buhle. They describe a dialectical interrelationship between insurgency and bureaucracy. Like Buhle, they see widespread racism and sexism in the

(predominantly white male) unions which "limited the possibility of organizing a significant proportion of the working class." They also stress "the inherent conservatism in organizations whose main concern was self-preservation, not militant struggle." Nonetheless, the life experience and workplace experience of workers in the Depression years of the 1930s combined with the ideas and abilities of left-wing organizers to push labour forward through powerful insurgencies. This pressured the government to support the workers' efforts for concessions from the employers — but this in turn strengthened union bureaucracy.

"The fundamental contradictions of the labor movement were evident at the start," they write. "The early victories came in strikes led by avowed socialists, Communists and Trotskyists. In 1934, strikes at Toledo Auto-Lite, led by socialists; of Minneapolis truck drivers led by Trotskyists; and West Coast longshoremen, led by Communists, were all successful. In addition, the largest strike of all, a textile strike, while not successful, succeeded in raising the specter of a new wave of revolutionary unionism. The result was the Wagner Labor Relations Act, which, for the first time gave workers the right to organize unions free of employer pressure and manipulation. But the victory was won at a price: the involvement of the government at virtually every stage of labor relations." Paul Buhle's comment that Communist-influenced CIO unions, in seeking to remain true to their militant origins, tended to substitute oppositional "foreign policy objectives for issues of internal democracy," suggests their susceptibility to the larger bureaucratic trend, a point also made by Glaberman and Faber.

The CIO unions had been built through militant new strike tactics on the part of radicalized workers and at first significantly increased their control of the labour process. But increasingly the union leaderships, in the interest of organizational stability, sought to control and curb working-class militancy "and rely more and more on the government to achieve their ends," an orientation which was nurtured by the social reformist New Deal of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Democratic Party (which won most of radicalized labour away from any notions of an independent labour party), and was then qualitatively advanced by business-labour-government cooperation during World War II.

"One-party governments" and restrictions of rank-and-file activity within the unions were important in helping to achieve such goals. Purging leftist influence, especially Communist Party influence, from the CIO was part of this process, which paved the way for the 1955 merger of the AFL-CIO. (Buhle offers rich detail on Meany's small-minded but effective undermining and squelching of CIO social policy traditions and union personnel in the unified labour movement.) The eventual result, write Glaberman and Faber, was "a bureaucratic structure, divorced from its own membership and unable to carry out even the most common and tradition functions of conservative unionism: the protection of jobs and living standards." Not surprisingly, this has been reflected in a decline in union member-

ship among non-farm employees in the US from 33 per cent at the time of the AFL-CIO merger to about 18 per cent today.

Such realities helped to generate a growing mood of discontent in labour's rank-and-file, with more radical unionists gaining a hearing, and in some cases winning leadership. Dissent over foreign policy issues, a tendency to engage in more militant struggles with more innovative organizing and strike tactics, and a growing concern — especially among service unions — to take seriously women and people of colour (Buhle observes that by 1995 a majority of union members were no longer white males) created pressures dramatically overturning the traditional AFL-CIO leadership, with the sweep into office of a "New Voices" team of John Sweeney from the Service Employees International Union, Linda Chavez-Thompson from the American Federation of State, Municipal and County Employees, and Rich Trumka from the United Mine Workers of America.

"It is not clear that the new leaders of the AFL-CIO will make a considerable difference," is the dour judgment of Glaberman and Faber, who stress the weight of larger socio-economic trends over personalities and internal union politics. Buhle is more inclined to consider the possibilities of the new situation, but he concludes his study with this reflection:

With the onset of the Sweeney era, the distance between the bureaucracy and ordinary union members has not been significantly lessened, nor has the historic dependence upon the Democrats been reconsidered. Ultimately, the problem of labor burcauracy cannot be isolated from the labor politics of exclusionism and imperial commitments. The near-collapse of the American labor movement in the second half of the twentieth century was the result of the same sorry policies of race and gender pioneered by Gompers, of cynical expectations to win abroad what had been given away at home. The answer to the moral and material corruption of the ensuing Meany and Kirkland eras lies in social commitment and leadership defined in the old Wobbly fashion: ordinary working people acting as their own leaders.

Buhle appears to feel that the AFL-CIO can, through rank-and-file pressure, be made to develop a progressive and class-conscious foreign policy, an active challenge to racism and sexism in the United States, and a tough, militant, democratic form of unionism. This would, he feels, help overcome the destructive and de-humanizing reality of capitalism. But it is not clear from Buhle's book how labour-radicals of today can help advance this process.

One would think that those hoping to move labour in this direction might need to join together into a serious activist organization informed by the understanding to be gained from these books. Glaberman and Faber tend to be critical of organizations as such — whether reformist or revolutionary. "The working class struggles against capitalism because its objective conditions of life force it to," they insist, "not because it is educated to some 'higher' consciousness by some outside force such as a political party." Examples of such Marxist-influenced labour

radicals as Samuel Gompers and Jay Lovestone do lend credence to this negative attitude. But since the authors conclude that revolutionary change is “possible” but “not inevitable,” one suspects that they would like to see — in fact — the emergence of some revolutionary working-class organization that, learning to avoid the fatal mistakes of earlier labour radicals, might tilt the scales of history toward the possibility of a better society.

This is where the final book under review comes in. Unlike the others, *Democracy Is Power* was not written with an academic audience in mind. Mike Parker and Martha Gruelle are associated with the monthly newsletter *Labor Notes*, which — like the book — is written for trade union activists and working-class militants. It is, as the subtitle indicates, focused on offering practical assistance to those who aim to rebuild unions from the bottom up. They insist “that working people need more power, and that the first way we can get it is through our unions,” adding: “Strong unions are good for their members, for all working people, and for building a more democratic society.” It becomes clear that their notion of democracy corresponds to the socialist vision shared by the younger Gompers and Lovestone.

We find here, however, a practical perspective geared to avoiding the mistakes made by many earlier labour radicals. Parker and Gruelle envision the creation of a network of rank-and-file caucuses (similar to Teamsters for the Democratic Union) that would become predominant and victorious in more and more unions. The authors build this “how-to” book around six themes which they lay out explicitly at the very beginning of the introduction:

- 1) Union power *requires* democracy. Unions need active members to be strong, and people won't stay involved long if they don't have control of the union's program.
- 2) The workplace (not the union hall) is the starting point for union democracy, because the purpose of democratic control in the union is to make it more effective against the boss. If members choose and organize their own job actions, they'll bring that power into union meetings.
- 3) No set of rules can guarantee democracy. When we talk about democracy we mean much more than fair election procedures, for instance, although rules are important tools. We mean a culture of control by the members.
- 4) Racism and sexism are still barriers to union democracy. We can't just remove explicit discrimination and be done; democratic unions consciously and actively strive to include everyone.
- 5) Working people are fit to run our own affairs. We are intelligent, can act cooperatively, and are fully capable of analyzing our situation and crafting the best strategy to improve it. Given real choices we will overcome our prejudices and work for the betterment of all.

- 6) Members have the right to organize around a view of how to run the union. This means more than the right to voice opinions. We have the right to work with others who agree to convince still more to come along. This is the essence of building a reform movement in a union.

Chock full of bulleted summaries and checklists, thumb-nail case histories of union experiences, facts and figures on union functioning and labour law and economic realities, *Democracy is Power* is hardly a contribution to the academic field of labour history. Instead, it seeks to be a tool for those who will actually make labour history in the early decades of the new century. The goal is to secure a qualitatively different balance between labour bureaucracy and labour insurgency than has been predominant in the history of the US working class up to now. The success or failure of this book may help answer questions which are (perhaps unavoidably) left hanging in the air by the other authors. The outcome will also help clarify the future of Marxism, democracy, the working class, and the human condition.