

Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



Schools of Democracy: A Political History of the American Labor Movement, by Clayton SINYAI, Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2006, x, 292 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0-8014-4455-5.

Étienne Cantin

Volume 62, numéro 3, été 2007

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/016496ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/016496ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)

1703-8138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Cantin, É. (2007). Compte rendu de [*Schools of Democracy: A Political History of the American Labor Movement*, by Clayton SINYAI, Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2006, x, 292 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0-8014-4455-5.] *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 62(3), 575–580. <https://doi.org/10.7202/016496ar>

Tous droits réservés © Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval, 2007

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

sometimes the writing is unduly legalistic. This approach has the advantage of efficiently conveying technical detail but does not necessarily provide the best opportunity to enjoy learning about an interesting subject. For example, during the McClelland Commission hearings Robert Kennedy had spectacular clashes with flamboyant Jimmy Hoffa. I was disappointed that this was hardly mentioned and that the transcripts of such exchanges were not included to enliven the discussion. A related criticism concerns the personalities of those being described. It would have been a more interesting book if it gave additional detail about the traits of key protagonists. Hoffa was charismatic and aggressive. Kennedy was somewhat callow. If such personas had been delineated the work's appeal would have been enhanced. The aforementioned criticisms may prompt some—probably including Jacobs

himself—to point out that a book about union corruption should frame its question narrowly and use only relevant research to present an argument. Those who make such a case may also argue that narratives about legal history lose focus if they provide unnecessary detail. My response to such musings is that I believe it is possible to present excellent and focused scholarship and simultaneously maximize entertainment value. This is particularly so when the object of analysis is: *Mobsters, Unions and Feds*. Maybe the problem is that lawyers (the author) and sociologists (me) are turned-on by different things! That said, I am not aware of a book that covers the same ground as this one—let alone one that does so using such thorough research and with such technical competence.

ANTHONY M. GOULD
Université Laval

Schools of Democracy: A Political History of the American Labor Movement,

by Clayton SINYAI, Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2006, x, 292 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0-8014-4455-5.

In this new political history of the American labour movement, Clayton Sinyai argues that the history of the American labour movement records an ongoing dialogue of American workers with one another and with other concerned citizens about the nature of democracy and the demands of citizenship. Although American labour has shown relatively little interest in socialism, neither have American trade unions practiced a “business unionism,” exclusively preoccupied with improving members’ wages. Rather, they have acted as organs of civic education preparing working people for the demands of political participation. The early American Federation of Labor (AFL) tried to achieve this end by encouraging unions to act as voluntary associations cultivating “civic virtue”

among their members. The growth of modern industrial capitalism and of the liberal state created a hostile environment for traditional republican notions of civic virtue and political participation, however, and forced the labour movement into the new departure represented by industrial unionism and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). According to Sinyai, modern industrial capitalism and liberal politico-legal institutions have thus compelled American workers to moderate their republican ideas concerning the demands of democratic citizenship. Still, the author—a researcher for the Laborers’ International Union of North America (LIUNA) and Political Director for the Laborers’ Local 11, who also completed a doctoral degree in political science at Rutgers University—insists that the

labour movement remains a rare force in American society still actively educating citizens for self-rule.

The first two chapters of Sinyai's book lay out the heritage of democratic thought on the question of the worker as citizen. The first chapter surveys the Western tradition of political thought, highlighting how political theorists—whether ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, British liberals or American successors of both—argued that certain habits or virtues were necessary for political participation under democracy. Figures such as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and Abraham Lincoln, using the Western tradition as a foundation, began to build “a uniquely American corpus of political thought, creating the conventional wisdom with which American labor would think and act” (p. 8). Their premises and ideas would even more directly influence the coming debate about the meaning of democratic citizenship in a rapidly industrializing republic.

It was not until the post-Civil War burst of industrial-capitalist development that labour and capital, rather than the yeoman farmer, would begin to dominate American politics and society. And it was only at this time that the American working class would adopt an enduring institutional expression. The trade unions, rather than a political party, would be labour's principal locus for debate and reflection and a repository of the American tradition of republican working-class politics. We find that in the early republic, many Americans looked to preserve in workers the virtues and talents of the dwindling ranks of yeoman farmers and small proprietors that were the traditional mainstays of American democracy. Amid the development of capitalism in the United States, however, “citizens were sorting themselves into unequal classes with astonishing speed. The American conventional wisdom that ‘all men are

created equal’ seemed increasingly at odds with observed facts” (p. 14). As Sinyai argues, the development of modern capitalism and “[t]he small proprietor's eclipse by the capitalists and workers of the great industrial concerns and trusts challenged fundamental tenets of American democratic thought. Americans had inherited the idea that a community of small property holders of modest but secure means was ideally suited to democratic government—and that a society dominated by polar classes was a poor candidate for republican self-rule” (pp. 47-48).

The labour movement, as exemplified during the Gilded Age by both the Knights of Labor and by the trade unions that joined together in 1886 to form the AFL, “took it as their task to defend American democracy. They sought both to check the usurpations of the powerful new employing class and to cultivate in workers the civic virtue needed for self-rule. But they adopted very different strategies to do so.” The Knights of Labor “thought wage-labor and democracy were ultimately irreconcilable,” while the crafts union activists of the AFL, while “[a]ccepting the private ownership of the means of production,” “hoped nonetheless to remove from wage labor the features that degraded the worker as citizen” (pp. 47-48). Avoiding both the typical “business unionism” take on the craft-based labour organizations affiliated with the AFL and the flawed perception of the federation's “voluntarism” as an “antipolitical” doctrine, Sinyai rightly insists that Samuel Gompers and other trade-union activists “saw these craft unions as political organizations in at least two major and related respects. They were associations that would check the power of large firms and organized money to dominate society and polity. And they were associations that in their everyday practices equipped workers with the habits and skills that democratic citizens needed” (p. 32). The

trade unions that Samuel Gompers and allied craft unionists helped construct were not simply intended to secure higher wages for their members but to educate workers in skills of democratic citizenship. Operating their own institutions would give working people valuable experience in the practice and habits of self-rule; exercising collective authority over work rules through their craft unions, they would thwart a crippling separation of the worker's mental and manual labour; relying on themselves for collective uplift rather than the dubious considerations of a paternal state, workers would conserve their spirit of independence and freedom.

As Sinyai notes, "Gompers and other AFL luminaries counseled American workers to avoid grand social projects and revolutionary challenges to capitalism. Instead, workers should parlay their control of the labor supply in narrowly defined crafts, especially skilled ones, to achieve prudent increases in wages and benefits" (p. 26). As Sinyai shows in the third chapter, however, the advance of mass production under the aegis of private corporate capital during the late 19th and early 20th centuries militated against the survival of working-class republicanism by undermining this craft strategy and the republican understanding of labour and democratic citizenship. Vast firms employing new machinery and technologies, economies of scale, and a highly intensified division of labour—culminating in the assembly line—could promise a huge expansion in productivity and consumption. But they also promised to end the craft union ideal whereby the worker served as the functional equivalent of the young Republic's small proprietor. "In industrializing America, old American notions about civic virtue and participation in self-rule were slipping into hazy memory" (p. 79).

As a mass production industrial sector apparently immune to craft union

organizing grew, a chorus of voices challenged the AFL's fealty to the craft union ideal. Spokesmen for the managerial revolution such as Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry Ford urged labour to abandon its opposition to the new division of labour and embrace the expanded wealth it promised, while "[t]he corporations soon discovered innovative personnel management techniques that could reduce labor conflict and increase productivity. ... Management itself was creating a 'rule of law' at work, quite without the input of labor unions" (p. 65). In response, craft unionists asserted that employees and employers "had an irresolvable conflict of interests that necessitated independent unions" (p. 71). Meanwhile, the revolutionary syndicalists of the Industrial Workers of the World counseled the AFL to renounce its opposition to the industrial division of labour, and summoned labour to organize on a new, industrial basis. For their part, the middle-class social and civic reformers of the Progressive movement called upon labour to join them in using the power of the state to discipline and regulate the giant trusts. A plethora of socialists, immigrant advocates and religious reformers recommended both. According to its critics, the AFL should abandon craft organization in favour of an all-embracing industrial union structure, and should seek the protection of the state for workers' interests. If labour was to contribute anything to American democracy, the unions had to represent the whole of American labour, not just the skilled elite in which unions were increasingly confined. Maintaining standards that effectively excluded the vast majority of workers from the ranks of organized labour certainly was an offence against traditional democratic ideals. Yet Gompers, his peers, and his successors resisted that change to the end, and in Sinyai's view their failure to help the unskilled majority in the

corporate age “failed democratic values” (p. 72).

As chapter four argues, it was only with the ascendancy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Deal that the arguments of the critics of craft unionism triumphed. At last, with Roosevelt’s election, the labour movement found in Washington a president willing to use the state on workers’ behalf—but the AFL leadership, true to the tradition of Gompers, continued to shun industrial organization and to defend voluntarist values. After a dramatic clash at the 1935 AFL Convention, the remarkable President of the United Mineworkers of America, John L. Lewis, led the champions of industrial unionism and state intervention out of the old Federation to build a new labour movement. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) would accept the support of Roosevelt and the state and organize mass-production workers in auto, steel, electronics and rubber on an industrial basis. Chapter five explains how the CIO’s new unionists captured leadership of the labour movement, emphasizing that “[i]t was the CIO that would bring the liberal revolution in citizenship to the American labor movement” (p. 137).

In Sinyai’s view, however, the Wagner Act and the administrative measures enacted during the New Deal to support organized labour led the new industrial unions into becoming mere “creatures of the state” (p. 148). Ironically, the person who exhibited the most doubts on this score was Lewis himself. Voluntarists had argued that a labour movement that accepted the state’s favours would find its autonomy and independence fatally compromised. Virtually as soon as the CIO was established, Lewis concluded that this was exactly what had happened; in a stunning break he turned on both Roosevelt and the CIO with vigour and spent the rest of his career trying to bring down the New Deal system

of state-regulated industrial relations. However, Lewis found himself shut out, as his successors in the industrial unions spent the Second World War trying to develop industrial councils or similar regulatory systems to give workers input into the government of industry in a world where craft union forms were obsolete. “By 1948,” the author explains, “America’s labor leaders had rejected the [skilled craftsmen’s] voluntarist ideals as unrealistic aspirations for the modern world.” And, as if the obvious needs restating, Sinyai argues that “[w]orkers could not be expected to approximate the civic character of Jefferson’s yeoman farmer when they confronted the vast political and corporate bureaucracies of postwar America” (p. 183).

Chapters six and seven address how organized labour nonetheless tried to move forward with its democratic-republican mission in the quarter-century following the war’s end. The 1947 Taft-Hartley overhaul of collective bargaining stripped the remaining voluntarist weapons from labour’s arsenal and “damaged AFL institutions more than those of the CIO unions that inspired its passage. Its provisions prohibited many of the practices, from pre-hire agreements to jurisdictional strikes to secondary boycotts, which enabled craft unions to operate effectively without the New Deal’s political tools” (p. 180). Moreover, under the leadership of Walter Reuther, the United Auto Workers failed to achieve by bargaining what the industrial unions had struggled to secure through wartime regulatory regimes—a sort of “codetermination” similar to that of Europe. With the defeat of these challenges emerged the postwar workplace, where management managed, the union grieved, and workers cultivated their civic virtue on their own time and on their own dime. With the workplace hostile to larger social ambitions, “union democracy” attracted renewed interest; perhaps, some argued,

worker participation in their unions could confer some practical experience of self-rule. The results, Sinyai argues, were somewhat disappointing, and “the declining vitality of the trade unions’ internal political life was becoming depressingly clear” (p. 191). Still, Sinyai insists that “[e]quipping America’s workers for democracy was—and is—how American trade unionists find meaning. However discouraging, the crusade would continue” (p. 199), notably in the form of the unions’ role as engines of political participation.

As Sinyai reminds us, it was the CIO’s Sidney Hillman who pioneered modern labour electoral action. In the past, party machines had educated and registered voters in great numbers and got them to the polls; if labour took over this function, Hillman believed, labour’s preferred party—the Democrats—would be obliged to take labour’s political demands seriously. When the two federations merged in 1955, Hillman’s idea was carried out on a broader scale under the leadership of George Meany. President of the new AFL-CIO, Meany was this era’s central labour figure. The AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education (COPE) and the federation’s affiliated unions honed their tools for mobilizing member political participation. The electoral power labour exhibited on the ground by the 1960s translated into access in Washington that Meany and his peers employed in pursuit of labour’s political agenda: civil rights legislation, an expanded welfare state, and a vigorous prosecution of the Cold War to defend democracy from the Communist challenge.

Still, labour never achieved quite enough access or organization for its own needs. Thus, an important trade union priority, repeal of Taft-Hartley, was doomed by a combination of determined opponents and half-hearted allies. Moreover, Sinyai explains that by the presidential election of 1968, union density was already in decline

and “[a] broad social suspicion of the federal government was being born, one that would be central to the conservative resurgence of the late twentieth century” (p. 222). Given that resurgence and the contemporary crisis of the American labour movement, Sinyai must close on an elegiac note. Fewer than 10 percent of nonagricultural workers in the United States are union members today, as opposed to roughly a third in 1955, and the erosion in membership continues. Antilabour laws and Republican appointments to the National Labor Relations Board made matters worse. “The totemic ‘golden age’ industrial unions were especially badly hit” (p. 225). Unions like the United Auto Workers are shadows of their former selves, and “[s]ocial commentators who took industrial relations exemplified by labor’s ‘golden age’ as their point of reference have been quick to interpret these troubles as a sign that the labor movement is on its deathbed. Those with a longer historical view will be less inclined to make rash predictions” (p. 226).

“Even in defeat,” Sinyai insists that the “labor movement continues to transform American politics in more democratic directions” and that “we must acknowledge the House of Labor as a school of democracy from which our nation is still learning” (p. 231). Through collective action women and men have learned to overcome both the subservience to bosses and the rivalry with each other that had been instilled by their need for a job. Although workers could not create the democratic-republic industrial order they wanted, they did honeycomb the ruthlessly competitive developmental dynamics of modern capitalism with practices based on their own democratic and egalitarian values. Through democratic deliberation and solidarity, workers won for themselves a voice in determining the conditions of their employment, setting important constraints on the arbitrary authority

of their bosses, gaining time to spend as they wanted, and in some cases running their government. For all the shortcomings, contradictions, and reversals evident in American labour movement's complex political history, Sinyai convincingly argues that this

achievement remains one of its most important legacies for denizens of the century to come.

ÉTIENNE CANTIN
Université Laval

The Struggle against Wage Controls: The Saint John Story, 1975-1976, by George VAIR, St. John's, Newfoundland: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 2006, 136 pp., ISBN-10: 1-8940-0007-2.

On October 14, 1976 approximately 1 million Canadian workers walked off their jobs to protest the program of statutory wage and price controls imposed one year earlier by the Liberal government headed by Pierre Trudeau. Despite its billing as a "National Day of Protest" by the Canadian Labour Congress, it was the closest thing to a national general strike in Canadian history. The protest was particularly successful in Saint John, New Brunswick where some 12,000 workers stayed off the job and, despite driving rain as many as 5,000 turned out to demonstrate, effectively shutting down the city by blockading roads and bridges. George Vair was the president of his UAW/CAW local at the time when the controls were imposed, and a key participant in the events leading up to the Day of Protest in the city. Drawing on his experiences during the course of the following year as well as documentary evidence, the book offers a first hand account of how October 14's industrial disputation came about.

The book opens with an examination of the controls program which Vair cogently argues were essentially wage controls. In New Brunswick, where workers were attempting to take advantage of a construction boom to close the wage gap between themselves and their counterparts in central Canada, the controls hit particularly hard. The anger this created was exacerbated by the seemingly arbitrary nature of their

implementation which is illustrated through an examination of the impact of the controls on specific workplaces and industries. The book then turns to how opposition to the controls was developed. Here the text focuses on the activities of the St. John Labour Council (where much of the existing leadership was replaced by young activists including Vair who became president), particularly those of its "Wage Control Committee". But it also covers the efforts of activists like Vair to push the labour movement generally into taking a stronger stance against the controls, tracing the CLC's halting steps towards the National Day of Protest, with particular attention to the 1976 CLC Convention where the CLC leadership reluctantly agreed to call a general strike "if and when necessary". In the event, the CLC called for a National Day of Protest on October 14. The book provides a compelling depiction of the events that transpired on this day in Saint John. In concluding, Vair argues that while at the time he had expected the mass protests to continue, the main reason that they hadn't was that the labour movement had effectively defeated the controls by then—partly by mitigating their impact through creative bargaining practices, and more generally by making them so unpopular that the government abandoned any plans to make them more than "temporary measures". Moreover, he contends that the protest strengthened the labour