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David Camfield

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## REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

# Recent Studies in Canadian Labour History from the Great Depression into the 21st Century

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PERRY ANDERSON'S OBSERVATION that “studies of the working class anywhere in the world, once a staple of history and sociology, have declined along with labour movements as a political force”<sup>1</sup> is undoubtedly true. This comment expresses an important point about the relationship between a particular kind of academic writing and its historical context. It is also worth noting that contemporary studies are less influenced by Marxist understandings of capitalism and class than those of the 1970s and 1980s, and less concerned with questions connected to the working class as a political force. Contemporary research also tends to be more sensitive to gender, race, and other social relations that mediate class relations.

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1. Perry Anderson, “Sinomania,” *London Review of Books*, 32, no. 2 (2010): 6.

In spite of the turn away from studying the working class noted by Anderson, histories of the working-class movement in Canada are still being written. The four books considered here are all focused squarely on unions, though political parties rooted in the working class are also considered to varying degrees and organizations of the unemployed figure in two of them. Each book, in its way, contributes to “the history of labour’s combativity and defence of its material circumstances” that is “important in charting a new politics of resistance” today.<sup>2</sup> A strong Marxist influence is only discernible in one of them, but none are marked by postmodernist social theory either.

Until the appearance of Stephen Endicott’s *Raising the Workers’ Flag*, there was no major published study of the Workers’ Unity League (WUL), the organization of unions formed and led by the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) during the Great Depression.<sup>3</sup> *Raising the Workers’ Flag* is the result of many years of research and aspires to offer a “comprehensive understanding of the outlook and practice” (424) of the WUL. Its 327 pages of text, nearly 50 pages of illustrations, and almost 100 pages of notes, bibliography and appendices are testimony to the author’s commitment to telling the WUL’s story. The motivation for this effort is clearly not just a desire to fill a gap in the academic literature. Endicott contends that the “continuing salience” of the struggles of the activists of the WUL lies in the fact that “the same erratic system of private market capitalism that they faced in the 1930s remains in charge of the Canadian and world economy in a new century” and that “many of the traditions fostered by the Workers’ Unity League” (xi) are relevant to resistance to the many deprivations of capitalism today.

*Raising the Workers’ Flag* opens with a brief overview of the working class and unions in Canada in the late 1920s and a chapter that introduces readers to the Communist International (Comintern), the Red International of Labour Unions (Profintern), and the relationship of the CPC to them. It describes some of the events leading to the creation of the WUL: the Profintern’s “cautious” (23) February 1929 letter to the CPC, its directive of October 1929 to form a “revolutionary trade union centre” (31) in Canada, the decision the following month by the CPC’s Political Committee to do so, and the low-key founding conference in May 1930. It then surveys the WUL’s earliest activities in the sectors where small CPC-led industrial unions already existed – the needle trades, lumber workers in Northern Ontario, Alberta miners – and among Cape Breton miners, where Communist support was significant. As Endicott briefly mentions, in workplaces where hostile employers refused to recognize any union those activists who were members of the CPC or who worked closely

2. Bryan D. Palmer, “Canada,” in Joan Allen, Alan Campbell and John McIlroy, eds., *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives* (Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2010), 219.

3. A dissertation on the WUL remains unpublished: John Manley, “Communism and the Canadian Working Class During the Great Depression: The Workers’ Unity League 1930–1936,” PhD diss., Dalhousie University, 1984.

with Communists were “understandably cautious” (37) about the project of trying to build brand-new highly militant industrial unions affiliated to a very small union centre that, as the Canadian section of the Profintern, was openly pledged to revolution. In Nova Scotia, the attempt to form a WUL mineworkers’ affiliate flopped when the leading radical in the province’s labour movement, CPC member J.B. McLachlan, declined the nomination to head the new union (a move that infuriated the party’s young provincial organizer). (41–42)

After a chapter centred on the Profintern congress of 1930, *Raising the Workers’ Flag* proceeds to examine the WUL’s struggles in the extremely difficult conditions that working-class activists faced in the first half of the 1930s. Most chapters focus on specific industries or fields of struggle: unemployed workers, coal miners, hard rock miners, the needle trades, wood workers and, briefly, fishers and cannery workers. WUL-led strikes of textile, furniture and other workers are also recounted, as are the three congresses held by the WUL. There is a chapter on women that looks at the WUL’s relationship with the Women’s Labour Leagues, women’s involvement in struggles of the unemployed, and WUL unions’ women’s auxiliaries. The dissolution of WUL affiliates into the unions of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) that WUL militants had denounced so vociferously is dealt with in the final chapter. In the course of this wide-ranging account, Endicott provides brief and sometimes evocative sketches of individuals who played important roles in the WUL. These include Tom Ewen (later McEwen), Harvey Murphy, Arthur (Slim) Evans, and Rebecca (Becky) Buhay. He is generally successful in the attempt to combine a chronological narrative flow for the entire book with focused attention to particular sectors.

*Raising the Workers’ Flag*, the fruits of extensive research conducted since Endicott’s retirement from York University, is written in an engaging style that makes the book accessible to non-specialists. There are also some gems in the footnotes: Endicott’s accounts of his efforts to gain access to Royal Canadian Mounted Police files now controlled by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and of being obviously filmed while examining declassified documents in the reading room of Library and Archives Canada (340–341), as well as an anecdote about Harvey Murphy giving advice about public speaking to the young Endicott after a May Day rally in Vancouver. (367) As this last story suggests, Endicott – born in 1928, and a former member of the CPC – was personally connected to Communists active in the Depression years. This familiarity helps him impart to the book a sense of the history of the WUL as lived experience.

The book effectively depicts the scope of WUL activity in a way that no previous published study has been able to do, and provides a note about affiliates and struggles not covered. Its description of organizing efforts, strikes, and how leading militants discussed their work and debated how to apply the CPC’s strategy conveys much of the character of WUL activity. The reader is left with no doubts about the tremendous dedication and courage of its officers and

rank and file. The high level of employer and state repression they faced is clearly documented, as are a few appearances by the Ku Klux Klan. Endicott's use of selected company as well as state records is quite effective, allowing him to show, for example, how a manager at BC forestry firm Bloedel, Stewart and Welch, also a key figure in the province's Loggers' Association, oversaw the use of blacklisting and invited provincial police to send undercover officers into logging camps to gather evidence against union organizers. (248–249)

Unfortunately, these strengths of *Raising the Workers' Flag* are accompanied by many features that make its account of the WUL far from satisfactory. First, it is evasive about a key issue: the WUL's creation was a consequence of a new international Comintern line – the “Third Period” – that began to develop in late 1927 and fully emerged at the sixth Comintern congress in mid-1928, and the decision to wind down the WUL was a consequence of the Comintern's change of line in the mid-1930s.<sup>4</sup> The Third Period line is briefly mentioned (22) but its essential role in providing the rationale for the establishment of a CPC “red union” centre in Canada is obscured. The 1934–1935 shift away from the Third Period and the arrival of the “Popular Front” line is handled better. That said, the connection between Comintern policy and the end of the WUL (304–311) is presented less than clearly.<sup>5</sup> Second, the content of the new line is not clearly explained. The theory that social democracy was “social fascism” is referred to and its sectarian character noted. (e.g. 326) Other important Third Period ideas, however, are not mentioned let alone assessed. These include claims about impending revolution<sup>6</sup> and the belief that a “process of rapid fascization of the reformist trade union apparatus and of its fusion with the bourgeois State” was underway.<sup>7</sup> This “led logically to the notion of splitting the unions, to the establishment of separate ‘red’ unions. But this was not formally argued – because of Lenin's explicit condemnation” of such an approach.<sup>8</sup> Third, the question of why the new line was adopted by the Comintern and what was behind its subsequent minor modifications is never addressed. As a result, the connections between the ascendancy of Stalin's group within the ruling party-state stratum in the USSR, the material international and

4. On the Comintern line changes, see Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 68–78, 120–136.

5. Compare with John Manley, “Canadian Communists, Revolutionary Unionism, and the ‘Third Period’: The Workers' Unity League, 1929–1935,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 5 (1994): 186–187.

6. For example, see “Extracts from the May Day Manifesto Issued by the ECC1,” in Jane Degras, ed., *The Communist International 1919–1943 Documents* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 3: 190–192.

7. “Extracts from the Theses of the Tenth ECC1 Plenum on the Economic Struggle and the Tasks of Communist Parties,” in Degras, ed., *Communist International*, 3: 55.

8. Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern* (London: Bookmarks, 1985), 127.

domestic pressures that shaped its thinking and actions,<sup>9</sup> the Comintern line, and the WUL are not analyzed. A fourth problem can be found in the explanation given for the CPC's slowness in creating the WUL (its US counterpart, the Trade Union Unity League, was launched at the end of August 1929). Endicott mentions "a certain amount of scepticism" about the Comintern line among party members, an "acrimonious debate" (24) among CPC leaders about the nature of Canada and its relationship to imperialism, and – "perhaps the most important reason" – "the size, composition, and structure" (26) of the CPC. Missing here is any mention of what John Manley dubs the "reconstruction of the party leadership" by the Comintern officialdom that "began after the sixth Comintern congress."<sup>10</sup> This was not completed until July 1929, when the Stalinist faction led by Tim Buck and Stewart Smith managed to engineer the majority in the CPC leadership that it had failed to win at the party convention the previous month.<sup>11</sup> This was a necessary prerequisite for moving the party towards launching its own union centre.<sup>12</sup> These evasions and omissions suggest the manner in which *Raising the Workers' Flag's* basic portrayal of the WUL – captured nicely in its opening words: "The Workers Unity League took shape in Canada in 1930 as a small but feisty organization that aimed to mobilize workers' resistance to the massive unemployment and the general misery of the Great Depression" (ix) – is misleading.

A fifth weakness is the book's characterization of the unionism practised by WUL activists. Attention is given to their strike strategy, summarized as "militant struggle, rejection of arbitration and conciliation, the widest democracy among the strikers, the strictest discipline in face of the enemy, mass pickets and mass action, the building of a united front of the rank and file of all working-class organizations, of employed and unemployed." (219) But the question of whether there is any validity in Ian Angus's overblown criticism that the WUL "constantly combined a readiness to enter into all-out combat, regardless

9. For discussion of these, see Michal Reiman, *The Birth of Stalinism: The USSR on the Eve of the "Second Revolution"* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

10. John Manley, "Red or Yellow? Canadian Communists and the 'Long' Third Period, 1927–36," in Matthew Worley, ed., *In Search of Revolution: International Communist Parties in the Third Period* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 223.

11. See the detailed account in Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montréal: Vanguard, 1981), 199–255 – a source that unfortunately does not appear in the bibliography of Endicott's book. It is worth mentioning that it is false to say, as Endicott does, that Maurice Spector, editor of the party's newspaper, "left to join the Trotskyists." (43) Spector was *expelled* from the CPC after declaring his support for the views of Trotsky and his co-thinkers of the Left Opposition.

12. Recognizing that a Stalinist "reconstruction" of the CPC occurred gives us a different perspective from which to assess the relationship between the WUL and the Comintern and Profintern, which Endicott claims "was collegial in nature, mutually supporting, and of great political and psychological value, especially to the league's leading members and organizers." (325)

of the balance of forces involved, with a total refusal to seek allies beyond its own ranks,” leading to “defeat after defeat,” is not addressed.<sup>13</sup> Nor is convincing evidence provided to support the claim that “a commitment to practise democracy in union affairs” was the “essence” of WUL unionism. (326) As James Naylor has written, *Raising the Workers’ Flag* shows that “the broadest participation and discussion ... over a range of issues” was encouraged but “it is difficult to square this with a feeling that important decisions were already made within the WUL leadership.”<sup>14</sup> There is reason to go further. Members of radical political organizations tend to conduct themselves within unions in ways that reflect the functioning and culture of their organizations. This, coupled with claims like the one made at the time in the United States that Communist “party leaders carry over into the mass organizations the same foul practices which signalize their rule in the party,”<sup>15</sup> gives cause to think that, considering what we know about the CPC from 1928 on, union democracy in the WUL was probably not as Endicott presents it. Another issue on which the book is less than persuasive is how WUL members related to other unions (frequently pilloried as “company unions”), especially when these were present in the same industries or workplaces as WUL activists, and the impact of WUL efforts to persuade their members to change unions.<sup>16</sup> For example, Ruth Frager’s critical assessment of the WUL’s needle trades affiliate (242) is quoted but not discussed.<sup>17</sup>

Readers interested in how unions are shaped by gender, sexuality, race, and nation will find these dimensions of social reality touched on only very occasionally or not at all in *Raising the Workers’ Flag*. Endicott did, though, deem it important to devote a few pages to defending the USSR. There is no question that it is relevant and significant to consider how a subjective “sense of solidarity with a rising socialist society ... helps to explain the extraordinary confidence” (325) of WUL activists. But the praise for Stalinist industrialization

13. Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 274. Angus’s view is implicitly challenged by Manley, “Canadian Communists.” However, Manley does not argue that WUL activists never acted in ways that were consistent with Angus’s accusation of “adventurism and sectarianism” (274).

14. James Naylor, review of *Raising the Workers’ Flag*, *Canadian Historical Review*, 94, no. 2 (2013): 333.

15. James P. Cannon, “The New Unions and the Communists,” *The Militant*, 30 November 1929, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1929/newunions.htm>.

16. On the mischaracterization of unions led by non-Communists as “company unions,” see James P. Cannon, “Aftermath of the Needle Trades Convention. 2. Character of the Right-Wing Unions,” *The Militant*, 28 June 1930, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1930/aftermath.htm>.

17. Frager discusses the issue in *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 180–210.

("the path of socialist collectivism"), accompanied by a mention of "the dark side of the Soviet experiment" (66), is both gratuitous and unconvincing.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, *Raising the Workers' Flag* provides an exhaustive but barely critical account of the WUL that is uneven in its treatment of historical details and analytically weak.<sup>19</sup> As a result, there remains work to be done on the character of the WUL's unionism and the effects and significance of its members' militant efforts.

Wendy Cuthbertson's *Labour Goes to War*, a study of the unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in Canada during the Second World War, differs from Endicott's book in style, being a more conventional academic work based on a doctoral dissertation. It has the distinction of being the first book devoted to examining how industrial union organizing happened in Canada during the momentous wartime labour breakthrough that was central to the recomposition of the working class in the 1940s. Its scope is limited to Ontario, and Southern Ontario in particular, but this is a logical restriction given the region's centrality for the wartime economy and CIO industrial unionism.

The war led to the near-disappearance of unemployment and "labour shortages appeared as early as 1940." (2) It is easy today to assume that the concomitant increase in workers' power is a sufficient explanation for industrial unionism's wartime breakthrough. However, as Cuthbertson notes, wartime conditions also added "new obstacles to unionizing" (2) to longstanding employer hostility to unions and the absence of any meaningful legal support for unionized workers' efforts to get their bosses to recognize their organizations and negotiate with union representatives. One was the influx into paid employment of many people with little or no experience of wage labour. Some were predisposed to antipathy to unions, especially people who had previously been self-employed or owned small businesses (unhelpfully called "middle-class workers" [30] in the book, rather than workers from middle-class backgrounds). People from rural areas and children below Ontario's legal employment age of fourteen also swelled the ranks of the workforce and both groups were frequently uninterested in unions. There was also an extremely high rate of turnover, with workers leaving one job to take a better

18. The uncritical discussion (63–64) of Sidney and Beatrice Webb's 1935 *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization?* is embarrassing and should be contrasted with the acerbic comments on the book in Hal Draper, "The Two Souls of Socialism," *New Politics*, 5, no. 1 (1966), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1966/twosouls/index.htm>. Endicott's view of the USSR in the 1930s is unaffected by both the arguments of anti-Stalinist socialists of the time – on which see Marcel van der Linden, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union: A Survey of Critical Theories and Debates since 1917* (Leiden: Brill, 2007) – and by later research such as Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization: The Formation of Modern Soviet Production Relations, 1928–1941* (London: Pluto, 1986).

19. For analysis of the WUL, there is more on offer in Manley, "Canadian Communists" than in *Raising the Workers' Flag*.



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PERRY ANDERSON'S OBSERVATION that “studies of the working class anywhere in the world, once a staple of history and sociology, have declined along with labour movements as a political force”<sup>1</sup> is undoubtedly true. This comment expresses an important point about the relationship between a particular kind of academic writing and its historical context. It is also worth noting that contemporary studies are less influenced by Marxist understandings of capitalism and class than those of the 1970s and 1980s, and less concerned with questions connected to the working class as a political force. Contemporary research also tends to be more sensitive to gender, race, and other social relations that mediate class relations.

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1. Perry Anderson, “Sinomania,” *London Review of Books*, 32, no. 2 (2010): 6.

efforts included a radio drama program. The response from workers was unexpectedly enthusiastic, but the fact that their eagerness to organize led to work stoppages led CIO officials to pull the plug. A city-wide drive in Hamilton was less successful. (57–59) Arguably the most valuable chapter of *Labour Goes to War* is “Wartime Organizing: Getting to a Majority.” This looks at how activists had to fight every step of the way. First they had to build support among workers. They then had to get employers to recognize their unions and negotiate with union representatives, since employers were under no obligation to bargain even when workers voted for union representation in votes held under the auspices of the Industrial Disputes Investigations Act. Activists also had to establish and maintain union power in the workplace and the payment of dues, both of which crucially depended on a strong shop steward presence. This chapter also discusses wartime strikes, suggesting that the militancy of union officials exceeded that of rank-and-file workers. (73) The book makes a case for the CIO as “a subaltern public sphere” (78) whose meetings, conferences, social events, national newspapers, and shop papers constituted a democratic community animated by a union ethos of “inclusive equality” (86) that still bore the stamp of Anglo-Celtic male dominance. A subsequent chapter deals with the CIO’s wartime discourse “of the nation’s workers and warriors fighting common enemies in order to win a modern, more compassionate country.” (121) Another looks at women and equal pay, an issue considered mainly with reference to the United Auto Workers (UAW), a union in which policy became more egalitarian within the confines of an outlook that lacked “any long-term vision of women’s equality” (144) and did not question the male-breadwinner model of the family.

The greatest contribution of *Labour Goes to War* to the history of the working-class movement is its discussion of how CIO organizing actually happened in manufacturing industries in wartime Canada prior to the arrival of the industrial pluralist regime for the political administration of labour instituted by Privy Council Order 1003 in 1944.<sup>21</sup> Thanks to Cuthbertson, we now have a synthetic overview of what workers did and of the ideological appeal that CIO officials made to potential members.

A question that can be asked about Cuthbertson’s account of organizing is whether in explaining CIO success it tends to underplay the importance of the self-activity of workers and overemphasize the agency of union staff and elected officers (including their formulation of the CIO public narrative). As *Labour Goes to War* makes clear, many workers were eager to join unions and

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are not discussed in *Labour Goes to War*.

21. Political administration is Mark Neocleous’s useful concept for “state management of the struggles of the working class” and, more broadly, the legal and administrative practices of capitalist states in civil society. See his *Administering Civil Society: Towards a Theory of State Power* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1996), 107. I analyze industrial pluralism in these terms in “Sympathy for the Teacher: Labour Law and Transgressive Workers’ Collective Action in British Columbia, 2005,” *Capital and Class* 99 (2009):81–107.

took initiatives to do so. This willingness to act fuelled the enormous growth of CIO unions. It also led to the expansion of TLC unions, with the TLC leadership organizing directly chartered federal locals to attract the same kinds of less-skilled workers that their CCL counterparts aimed to organize.<sup>22</sup> In Quebec, the membership of the Catholic unions grew too. What officials did to build their unions obviously mattered, but perhaps less than this book suggests. Relying on primary sources generated by union officers and staff can lead to implicitly adopting the standpoint of union officials on events and thereby to overemphasizing their agency relative to that of rank-and-file workers. *Labour Goes to War* does tend to reflect the standpoint of CIO officials. On a related note, *Labour Goes to War* lacks any discussion of what Alan Sears calls the “infrastructure of dissent” – “the means of analysis, communication, organization and sustenance that nurture the capacity for collective action”<sup>23</sup> – in communities and workplaces that produced the layer of worker activists whose indispensable role in CIO organizing is acknowledged in the book.

Also questionable is the suggestion that the officialdom was more militant than the rank-and-file during the war years. The evidence used to support this view is that, in 1944, 54 per cent of Canadian UAW members voted in favour of a wartime no-strike pledge, which was affirmed in the UAW International’s referendum. Yet Cuthbertson’s source on the issue makes clear that only a minority of all UAW members cast ballots in the referendum and that “in the period that the vote was taking place, the winter and spring of 1944 and 1945, a majority of the auto workers went out on wildcat strikes.”<sup>24</sup> As this example suggests, it is what rank-and-file workers actually did in the workplace that must be examined in order to make credible claims about militancy. In addition, adequate evidence is not presented to support the claim that during the war workers struck (122) “seldom, if ever, in defiance of their leaders.”<sup>25</sup>

*Labour Goes to War* would have benefitted from devoting some attention to elucidating precisely what kind of unionism was advocated and practised in the CIO unions in Canada, identifying the significant ways in which it differed from the industrial unionism of the early 20th century as well as that of the WUL. The “emphasis on cooperation” (114) with employers that Cuthbertson

22. Doug Smith, *Let Us Rise: An Illustrated History of the Manitoba Labour Movement* (Vancouver: New Star, 1985), 100.

23. Alan Sears, “Creating and Sustaining Communities of Struggle: The Infrastructure of Dissent,” *New Socialist* 52 (July–August 2005): 32. Sears develops and historically explores this concept in his *The Next New Left: A History of the Future* (Halifax and Winnipeg, Fernwood Publishing, 2014).

24. Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes: The Struggle Against the No-Strike Pledge in the UAW During World War II* (Detroit: Bewick, 1980), 119.

25. On one group of workers in a CIO union who clearly did defy their officials during the war, see Michael Earle, “‘Down with Hitler and Silby Barrett’: The Cape Breton Miners’ Slowdown Strike of 1941,” in Michael Earle, ed., *Workers and the State in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Fredericton: Acadiensis, 1989), 109–143.

notes would have been more fully explained had she integrated an appreciation that the CIO's top leaders had from the beginning been committed to contracts that prohibited strikes and did not challenge management's control over the running of their firms.<sup>26</sup> In spite of these and other shortcomings,<sup>27</sup> *Labour Goes to War* is a welcome contribution to the history of the Canadian working-class movement in a pivotal era.

As Jason Russell notes in *Our Union*, research on unions in Canada during the years after the Second World War has "concentrated on national unions, anti-Communism, state policy, and issues surrounding collective bargaining." (4) This is understandable, given the importance of the new regime of industrial legality and the Cold War campaign to drive "reds" out of union leaderships. However, as Russell argues, "the agendas and activities of national and international union offices ... should not be considered the sum total of what unions actually did in the postwar years." Importantly, "the union local has not received adequate attention as a key agency for the organized working class in Canada as it sought to create a new place for itself in post-World War II Canadian communities." (7, 8)

With this in mind, *Our Union* is devoted to the study of Local 27 of the UAW and later the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) in London, Ontario over the four decades following the certification of its first bargaining units. Like *Labour Goes to War*, it is based on a doctoral dissertation. The union it studies is distinctive insofar as it was entirely a product of the post-war era that soon became a composite local of workers employed in a range of manufacturing facilities outside the auto industry, producing "everything from locomotives to envelopes to sonar systems," (83) usually for firms whose head offices were in the US.<sup>28</sup> As a consequence of its multi-unit structure, it "did not have one single defining strike, lockout, or closure." (255) *Our Union* presents the local's history through global capitalism's post-war boom and into the much more difficult period for workers that ensued. It offers a comprehensive account of all aspects of the local's activities: organizing, collective bargaining, relations

26. Staughton Lynd, *Solidarity Unionism: Rebuilding the Labor Movement from Below* (Chicago: Charles Kerr, 1992), 29.

27. These include an underdeveloped conceptualization of the subaltern public sphere, the brief discussion of which bizarrely mentions "establishment groups such as the Canadian Manufacturers' Association and the Business Council of National Issues" as "contemporary examples of *subaltern* [emphasis added] public spheres," (78) and a failure to note the democratic limitations of CIO unions, on which see Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (London and New York: Verso, 1986), 61–62.

28. In 2012, Local 27's unit at Electromotive, a company formed after the sale and division of GM Diesel (the location of the local's second bargaining unit, organized in 1950), was the target of a high-profile lockout that ended in the closing of the plant. See Herman Rosenfeld, "The Electro-Motive Lockout and Non-Occupation: What Did We Lose? What Can We Learn?," *The Bullet* 615, 12 April 2012, <http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/615.php>.

between union and management during the term of contracts, union activities, the union newsletter, involvement with the city's labour council, and efforts in electoral politics at the local, provincial, and federal levels. The local's depiction in the pages of the *London Free Press* is also described. A final chapter looks at the local in relation to the working-class families to which its members belonged.

Russell is absolutely right to argue for the importance of studying local unions. The vast majority of workers who have participated in the working-class movement in Canada in some way during the second half of the 20th century have done so through the activities of their locals. The bulk of union activity, whether directly connected to the paid workplace or not, has taken place at the local level. For these reasons, anyone who wishes to understand unions as working-class organizations should put local unions at the centre of their thinking. There are few detailed, thoroughly researched studies of locals, and for this reason alone *Our Union* is valuable.

Its account of UAW/CAW Local 27 makes the noteworthy point that activists persistently attempted to challenge management rights in the workplace using labour-management meetings and grievance and arbitration procedures, even if these methods were often ineffective. (149–150, 155) This is a useful challenge to the belief that workers ceased to challenge managerial control of the labour process through unions after the arrival of industrial pluralism, with its prohibition of direct action during the term of a contract as a way to resolve workplace disputes. Similarly, Russell's stress on the extent to which employers tried to prevent workers from unionizing and maintained a hostile stance towards the union once they did (163) is a salutary challenge to ideas about a post-war compact that involved management happily accepting newly tamed unions. *Our Union* also uncovers the role played in the local and the city's labour council by left-wing members who were critical of the UAW's Administration Caucus leadership. The left in the local gradually declined as a result of plant closings and "both subtle and overt efforts by the staff representatives and UAW national and international offices to align the local ideologically with the broader union." (75)

Russell argues that the local was "not always perfect, but it was a working-class institution about which its members could rightly say that it was 'our union.'" (262) However, although *Our Union* devotes chapters to collective bargaining and labour relations it misses the opportunity to analyze how the local as an organization was shaped by the mode of industrial legality in which Canadian unions were enmeshed from 1944 on. No argument is developed about how the fragmented organization of workers into separate bargaining units and the practice of bureaucratically constrained bargaining and grievance and arbitration handling affected what active members did (and did not do). Consequently, the ways in which state power partially constituted the nature of Local 27's unionism go unnoted. More broadly, *Our Union* does not address capitalist hegemony in post-war Canada. The result is a one-sided account of

Local 27. This obviously *was* an organization created and shaped by a group of wage-earners who were overwhelmingly white male citizens. But these people were not acting in a vacuum; they were conditioned by powerful forces largely beyond their control. Inquiring into how a historically specific configuration of patriarchal, racist, and heterosexist class rule influenced workers and put its stamp on their union would not have denigrated their actions or aspirations. The book's study of Local 27 would also have been stronger if it had been better contextualized in the political economy of capitalism in Canada during the "Long Boom" and the region's working class. Sharper conceptualizations of bureaucracy and social unionism could have helped Russell to offer more insights about the character of unionism in the local. Given that the nature of a union organizing effort affects the kind of unionism that emerges from this formative process, it would have been useful to delve into what workers actually did in the course of some of the campaigns that created Local 27's many units. Such absences make *Our Union's* study of a local union less illuminating than it could have been.

Carmela Patrias and Larry Savage's *Union Power* is a history of unions in the Niagara region of southern Ontario, one of the "histories with a popular bent" (ii) published in the "Working Canadians" series produced by the Canadian Committee on Labour History (the publisher of this journal) in conjunction with Athabasca University Press. It moves from the start of the digging of the Welland Canal in 1827 through until 2011 in 185 pages (more than half dedicated to the period from 1970 to 2011). It is organized into over two dozen sections of varying lengths instead of a small number of chapters. Its topic is framed in terms of "struggle and solidarity" as the core of the union power that can "shape and influence" the sphere of paid work "and the broader political, social, and economic spheres" (4) in which it is located, rather than in relation to academic literature on union or working-class history. Based on primary research and citing a small number of secondary sources in its end-notes (there is no bibliography), it is written in a straightforward style with an eye to readers outside universities.

*Union Power* does not develop a central argument about the historical evolution of unions in the region beyond the claim that "unions as a political and economic force, in Niagara and elsewhere in the country, have delivered benefits to the working class that otherwise would have been unrealizable" but that "new market realities ... present serious challenges to the labour movement." (184) What it does offer is a historical overview that focuses mainly on events such as strikes and organizing efforts. The mediation of class by race in the region in the early 20th century is examined; this demonstrates the extent of racist responses by Anglo-Celtic employers and workers to people from southern and eastern Europe and China, taking note of attempts to unite Anglo-Celtic and "foreign" workers of European heritage in unsuccessful strikes in 1920 and 1921. Also covered are the corporate welfare schemes of the Plymouth Cordage Company in Welland, unemployed workers' organizing

during the Great Depression, Cold War politics in the region's unions (in which the CPC was for many years a significant force, with NDP supporters only taking control of the labour council in St. Catharines in 1980 [174]), controversies around racism in housing in the 1950s and sexism in the 1960s at McKinnon Industries (a GM subsidiary and the site of the first CIO foothold in the area after workers formed UAW Local 199 in 1936), the role of unions in the founding of Brock University, the decline of manufacturing and private sector unions since the 1970s, migrant farm workers, and the relationship of Niagara unions to the NDP.

Patrias and Savage have successfully produced a regional labour history that will be appreciated by unionists and other readers outside the academy as well as by researchers in the field. *Union Power's* accessible style also makes it a suitable book for undergraduate students at all levels. Its use of interviews conducted in the 1970s and 1980s as well as more recently contributes to one of its best features: its demonstration of the importance of gender and especially racial divisions in the working class in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Its insight into the central role played by people of southern and eastern European heritage in union breakthroughs in the region during and after the Second World War is noteworthy. (64) So too is what it reveals about employers' use of company unionism as a mid-20th century union avoidance strategy, which is consistent with what Cuthbertson argues on this point. There are also useful tidbits about the CPC-led labour left, the political conflict between it and social democrats from the 1950s to the 1980s, and how the provincial NDP government's Social Contract played out in Niagara's unions in the early 1990s. A brief mention of how in the early 1970s the St. Catharines and District Labour Council aided non-unionized workers whose employment standards rights had been violated, which "cultivated a 'fight back' culture within the local labour movement and solidified organized labour's place as a political force within the community," (89) is a hint about the strength of not just union but working-class solidarity in some parts of Canada prior to the end of the Long Boom and the ensuing ruling-class offensive. Accounts of the struggles of unionized hotel workers against a particularly vicious employer between 1999 and 2009 and the repeated failed organizing drives at the region's casinos over roughly the same period give glimpses of the difficulties facing workers in an economic sector that is now important in a region where few manufacturing jobs remain.

*Union Power* would have benefited from giving more attention to the broader processes of capitalist development and working-class formation within which the events it discusses were embedded, especially for the period since 1945.<sup>29</sup> For example, the lack of even a brief description of the Long Boom is an obstacle

29. Even an extremely brief opening mention of indigenous peoples and European settler-colonialism in the region would also have been welcome, to remind readers of what came before wage work in canal construction.

to understanding labour history since the Second World War. Coming in the same period, the growth of public sector unions is perhaps the most obviously missing piece of the story of Niagara labour told in *Union Power*. The political strikes that were part of the St. Catharines Day of Action in 1998 are another curious absence. After the section on “Women and Workers of Colour in the 1950s and 1960s” race vanishes and gender is almost never mentioned. One can only speculate about what integrating gender, race, and migration into, for instance, the stories of struggles in hotels and casinos would reveal. Some scrutiny of how what workers do through unions has changed over time and why these changes have occurred would have added a layer of analytical depth and helped explain such observations as “most unions simply did not have the capacity to develop a culture of political action outside the scope of electoral politics” (182) in the late 1990s.<sup>30</sup> Stronger editing might have smoothed the sometimes-choppy organization of the book’s sections and shortened a three and a half page long quotation from a 1982 lecture about universities and unions by United Steelworkers of America official Lynn Williams (who was involved with the founding of Brock University).

Even though they all add to our understanding of class struggle and workers’ organizations in Canada in the 20th century, the four titles reviewed here are a fairly disparate bunch. However, reading them together raises a few issues – none unique to these works – that I think deserve discussion.

First, the way we write about unions is rarely conscious enough of a point made nearly forty years ago by Richard Hyman: “what does it mean to say ‘the union’ adopts a particular policy or carries out a certain action? This is a clear instance of ... reification: treating an impersonal abstraction as a social agent, when it is really only people who act.”<sup>31</sup>

Second, none of the four books gives enough attention to thinking about the unions studied as organizations existing within larger social processes in time. Perhaps most striking is that they make little or no effort to consider specific unions as parts of broader working-class movements and class formations. This is a common problem in contemporary historical writing about unions. The encouragement to think about big questions that was generated by debates among historians and others in the 1970s and 1980s about class and capitalist development<sup>32</sup> and by the political context of the time has long since disappeared. In its absence, challenges to the fragmentation of knowledge and routinization produced by the organization of research into institutionally divided and frequently competing academic disciplines have weakened.

30. Here again the issues raised by Sears’s argument about the infrastructure of dissent are pertinent.

31. Richard Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 16.

32. For the debates among historians of the working class, see the discussion in Palmer, “Canada.”



Labour history has suffered as a result. The intellectual response this situation calls for is not a return to a past set of debates. Rather, we need new attempts to connect the history of unions and other workers' organizations with theorizing class in capitalist societies as a process and relationship interwoven with race, gender, sexuality, and colonialism.<sup>33</sup> This could mean, for example, trying to analytically situate TLC, ACCL, WUL and CIO unions within the class formation and working-class movement divided by ethno-racial, gender, skill and other cleavages that existed during the capitalist crisis of the 1930s and the war economy that followed. Doing so could enrich our understanding of some of the specific features of these unions and their relevance or irrelevance to different groups of working-class people.

Finally, researchers who choose to study "the history of labour's combativity and defence of its material circumstances" at least in part because it is "important in charting a new politics of resistance" – an ethically compelling orientation, as Jeff Noonan has argued<sup>34</sup> – should attend more to explaining why workers' organizations were strong in periods when they were stronger than they are today. This question directs us, I think, to the role played by committed radicals in fostering militancy, democracy, and solidarity among their fellow workers. For example, Cuthbertson's book touches on this issue but there is more to be learned about the workplace political activity of the labour left in the 1930s and 1940s. The question of explaining strong workers' organizations also highlights the importance of the social roots of working-class power in workplaces, households, and communities. These will only be excavated by social histories of unions and other workers' organizations that dig deeper and wider in order to reveal everyday practices and experiences that were conducive to unity and solidarity, whether among narrow groups of people or on a broader basis.

33. For example, Himani Bannerji, "Building from Marx: Reflections on Class and Race," *Social Justice*, 32, no. 4, (2005): 144–160. I discuss some theoretical resources and sketch an integrated approach in "Reorienting Class Analysis: Working Classes as Historical Formations," *Science and Society*, 68, no. 4 (2004–2005): 421–446.

34. Jeff Noonan, "The Historical and Contemporary Life-Value of the Canadian Labour Movement," *Labour/Le Travail* 71 (2013): 9–27.