

**"WE ARE ALL LEADERS":
A Symposium on a Collection of Essays Dealing
with Alternative Unionism in the Early 1930s.***

[This journal continues to publish symposia on books deemed to be important in the field of labor history. Thanks to the interest of involved readers there will be a number of such symposia in the next issues, dealing with a variety of subjects. Please continue to make suggestions for works to be dealt with in the future. Robert Zieger oversaw this symposium. djl]

The Old New Labor History

by
Robert H. Zieger**

"We Are All Leaders"'s celebration of rank-and-file labor activism of the 1930s speaks to an older labor history agenda. Its essays posit one kind of alternative to the rise of the CIO and the New Deal system of industrial relations. The authors of the essays in this collection document vividly and sometimes eloquently episodes of popular mobilization in behalf of grass roots, democratic, "horizontal" labor organization. None of the contributions, however, asks difficult questions of its subject and none shows any interest in another kind of widespread pattern of working-class behavior in the depression decade, namely opposition and/or indifference to labor-based activism. Thus in historiographical terms, *"We Are All Leaders"* is something of an anachronism. The contributors are practitioners of the "old" new labor history, depicting the events of the 1930s in the idiom of the 1960s.

All of the essays provide documentation for the existence of dis-

* *"We Are All Leaders": A Symposium on a Collection of Essays Dealing with Alternative Unionism in the Early 1930s*. Edited by Staughton Lynd. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996. 343 pp.

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tinctive laborite activism. The various authors invite readers to experience feelings of sympathy and admiration for ordinary workers and for their leftist spokespeople in their efforts to improve conditions, forge democratic organizations, and create class-based community movements. "*We Are All Leaders*" features nutpickers, textile workers, hard coal miners, tenant farmers, meatcutters, garment workers, match workers, and other industrial workers. All fight the good fight, directed as much against CIO bureaucrats and manipulative federal officials as against hard-hearted employers.

Against the odds, these workers, sometimes with the selfless support of ideological radicals, sometimes despite the organized left's mistaken prescriptions, followed the logic of exploitation and dispossession from the shop floor to the larger community. They built energetic local organizations that often reshaped local politics even as their efforts boosted workers' material standards and asserted their rights in the workplace. If indeed it is true, as editor Staughton Lynd and other contributors believe, that the labor historiography of the 1930s is dominated by themes of pro-CIO celebration, these essays surely serve to redress the balance and to remind readers of the diverse and multi-faceted character of popular activism in the depression era.

But in fact this premise seems questionable. As early as 1969, Staughton Lynd was positing an alternative rank-and-file reading of the labor history of the 1930s. In journal articles, personal appearances, and his 1973 book *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers* (co-edited with Alice Lynd), Lynd urged scholars and activists to reconceive the period.¹ Indeed, Mark Naison's essay in this collection, "The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the CIO," originally published in 1968, is reprinted here without significant change. By the mid-1970s, the notion that the CIO was a bureaucratic sell-out, the Wagner Act regime a straight-jacket, and the New Deal labor tradition a cruel hoax inflicted on America's working people was widespread, especially among younger scholars. Serious popular works, such as Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United States* (1971), Jeremy Brecher's *Strike!* (1972), and James Green's *World of the Worker in Twentieth-Century America* (1980) aggressively advanced these themes.

Much of the literature on the CIO-era over the past 25 years has factored in the rank-and-file, grass-roots perspective advanced by Lynd. Little of the scholarly literature on the CIO published since at least

¹*Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers*, Alice and Staughton Lynd, eds. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); Staughton Lynd, "Guerrilla History in Gary," *Liberation*, Oct. 1969, 17-21; Staughton Lynd, "Personal Histories of the Early CIO," *Radical America*, May-June 1971, 49-76; Staughton Lynd, "The Possibility of Radicalism in the Early 1930's: The Case of Steel," *Radical America*, Nov.-Dec. 1972, 37-64.

1980 can fairly be accused of cheerleading. Indeed, even my own general history of the CIO, which exhibits some sympathy for the goals and dilemmas of national union leadership, is hardly without treatment of workers' agency, union bureaucracy, and the limitations of the Wagner Act–National War Labor Board regime.²

Most of the essays in *"We Are All Leaders"* deal with workers on the margins of the American industrial economy of the 1930s. Auto, steel, electrical, rubber, transport, construction, and other central core workers make only incidental appearances if they show up at all. Geographically, we spend much of our time in places such as Austin, Minnesota, Barberton, Ohio, northeastern Pennsylvania's declining anthracite region, and New England's equally troubled textile towns. Of all the essays, only Janet Irons' re-examination of locally based unionism in the southern textile industry during the NRA period deals with workers anywhere near the heart of the 1930s economy.

Geographic or occupational marginality, of course, is no excuse for neglect. In fleshing out Lynd's generation-old agenda, the historians represented here add much fascinating new material. Several of these essays, notably Rosemary Feurer's on St. Louis nutpickers, Michael Kozura's on hard coal miners-cum-illegal-entrepreneurs, and John Borsos' on Barberton's diverse industrial working class would provide rich new material for Irving Bernstein's splendid chapters, titled "Stirrings Among the Unorganized" and "Unrest in Odd Places," if he could be prevailed upon to do a revised edition of *Turbulent Years*.³

If the several venues and mobilizations depicted in *"We Are All Leaders"* are to be regarded as sui generis (as several authors suggest), the book stands as an interesting and at times even inspiring reminder of popular agency. If, on the other hand, as Lynd's introduction suggests, the episodes described here are to be thought of as representing a viable and generalizable kind of labor activism that could have, would have, should have triumphed in place of the "real existing" industrial union regime created during the 1930s and 1940s, *"We Are All Leaders"* comes up short.

The problem with Lynd's perspective, as pointed out by David Brody 22 years ago,⁴ was that it sacrificed celebration for analysis. It ignored

²Robert H. Zieger, "Toward the History of the CIO: A Bibliographical Report," *Labor History*, 26 (1985), 487–516; Robert H. Zieger, "The CIO: A Bibliographical Update and Archival Guide," *Labor History*, 31 (1990), 413–40; Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

³Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933–1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 92–171.

⁴David Brody, "Radical Labor History and Rank-and-File Militancy: *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working Class Organizers* by Alice and Staughton Lynd," *Labor History*, 16 (1975), 117–26.

difficult questions about the character of militancy, the legitimate concerns of national union leaders, and the degree of anti-union feeling among workers. These limitations are apparent in *"We Are All Leaders"* as well. Thus, for example, the Minnesota industrial workers depicted by Peter Rachleff are transformed almost overnight from militant, almost syndicalist labor and community activists into apathetic and cynical victims, seemingly because of the clever manipulations of self-serving politicians, unrealistic radical sectarians, and narrow-minded union bureaucrats, along with the temporary absence of a charismatic local activist. John Borsos ably sketches the unique laborite milieu of Barberton, which did indeed seem to have a vigorous and community-involved labor movement well into the post-war period. But Barberton in the 1930s was a city of 19,000 and thus hardly in a position to be on the cutting edge of laborite transformation. In nearby Akron, a city seething with industrial unionism, company union sentiment remained strong throughout the 1930s and shop floor militancy was *inversely* related to working-class political and community solidarity.⁵ Throughout the late 1930s, public opinion polls, organizers' reports, and news accounts often found industrial workers apathetic, conservative, and hostile to unionism. Leaders of the new industrial unions faced powerful national corporations even as they attempted to build and sustain unions among a working class in which racial, religious, gender, and occupational fractures ran deep. National CIO leaders such as Sidney Hillman and John L. Lewis were at least as concerned about the popularity of company unionism and rightist authoritarian mobilization of discontented workers as they were about the kinds of organizations depicted in this book.

The best of the recent literature on the 1930s is informed by the issues Lynd raised a generation ago but it is also responsive to Brody's critique. Thus, recent books by James Hodges, Steve Babson, Bruce Nelson, Howard Kimmeldorf, Daniel Nelson, Joshua Freeman, Gary Gerstle, Steve Fraser, and Nelson Lichtenstein,⁶ for example, are sensitive to rank-and-file perspectives and keenly aware of the limits of CIO unionism and the Wagner Act industrial relations regime. Dealing as most of them do with central industries in key locales, they provide a far more plausible and useful agenda for students of American labor history than do the engaging, but interpretively loaded, essays in this book.

⁵Daniel Nelson, "The CIO at Bay: Labor Militancy and Politics in Akron, 1936-1938," *Journal of American History*, 71 (1984), 565-86.

⁶With the exception of Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), full citations for these books can be found in the articles cited in note 2 above and Zieger, *The CIO*, 380-81.

"What did workers want in the 1930s, anyway?"

by
Roger Horowitz*

A sense of *deja vu* swept me as I read the jeremiads against the CIO in Staughton Lynd's collection, *"We Are All Leaders."* "Oh, this debate again," I thought with some fatigue, as I noticed how the well-worn arguments over the possibilities for radicalism in the 1930s rarely engaged with new ways of understanding workers' consciousness advanced by scholars such as James R. Barrett, Elizabeth Cohen, Gary Gerstle, Robin Kelley, Alice Kessler-Harris, and David Roediger.

Yet . . . Lynd and his collaborators pushed me to think about a shortcoming of Robert Zieger's celebrated book on the CIO: his decision to concentrate on the "official" trade union movement. Lynd's book, despite its many flaws, reminds us of the grass roots working class revolt of the 1930s which gave rise to the New Deal and industrial unions. The essays should force us to remember that the plans of men like Sidney Hillman and Robert Wagner would have remained stillborn without workers taking action at work and in their community, prior to the coming of the CIO.

In the end, though, the consciousness and aspirations of workers in the 1930s are not captured in Lynd's collection, precisely because the essays remain shackled to outdated polarities. The dichotomy simply is too rigid: Either there are virtuous community-based working-class organizations or there are bureaucratic national unions. Localism always is a virtue, cosmopolitanism usually a sin. Except for Liz Faue's essay, men have no gender; while there are some black workers (notably in Rosemary Feurer's essay), white workers have no race. World War II scarcely exists, except as a backdrop in Stan Weir's engaging recollection. Patriotism and Americanism? Nowhere to be seen. As for Elizabeth Cohen's "moral capitalism," there is plenty of it about, but none of the authors identify what they describe as such.

I think there is a great deal to be learned by looking at the alternative forms of unionism and working class protest in the 1930s – and thereafter. Deducing working class consciousness from trade unionism was one of the main errors of the old Commons-Perlman Wisconsin

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school, and a new institutionalism on the CIO can make the same mistake. But to take grass roots sentiment seriously, Lynd and his collaborators also have to consider that workers' support for the CIO and the New Deal was a conscious act of rebellion against exploitation at work and exclusion from the American political system.

To explore this further, I want to concentrate on Peter Rachleff's article in Lynd's collection, "Organizing 'Wall to Wall': The Independent Union of All Workers, 1933-1937." I do so partly because I have examined the primary sources on and written about the Independent Union of All Workers (IUAW). But more important, I think the way Rachleff distorts the remarkable story of the IUAW and its impact on industrial unionism reflects larger problems with Lynd's collection.

Rachleff and I agree that the Austin, Minnesota-based IUAW was an impressive organization. It was the first successful union in meatpacking in the 1930s; it was a left-wing union, influenced by the Wobbly philosophy of "One Big Union," which organized throughout the upper midwest in meatpacking and other trades. It was a thoroughly democratic organization, and persistently militant towards employers. This is a story that Rachleff tells well.

I take exception, however, to Rachleff's main complaint: the IUAW's decision to enter the CIO in 1937, which necessitated dissolving. Rachleff alleges that joining national industrial unions isolated Austin packing-house workers from other workers in their town and their region, and brought to an end this marvelous example of rank and file unionism.

Rachleff attributes the IUAW's fatal decision to two conjunctural factors: First, the decision of union leaders to settle a strike in Albert Lea by having the IUAW affiliate join a national union, under pressure from the Farmer-Labor Party governor of Minnesota; second, the absence of union founder Frank Ellis at this particular moment, as he was in prison under trumped-up Mann Act charges. In Rachleff's account, the decision to join the CIO is posed suddenly, forced on the union by the state and employers, and railroaded through before Ellis could return and halt it.

I share neither Rachleff's evaluation of the consequences of CIO affiliation, nor his depiction of contours of the debate inside the IUAW. I take these points in turn.

First, the IUAW sought CIO entry in meatpacking immediately after the 1935 AFL convention, and continued its lobbying campaign throughout 1936 and 1937. The IUAW's decision to affiliate in spring 1937 reflected the achievement of a dearly-cherished ambition, not a sudden shift in the organization's agenda and direction. It was a persistent suitor, not an unwilling partner.

Second, Frank Ellis was a major figure in the IUAW leadership

that courted the CIO. Identified as the union's president, Ellis' name appears on a November 1936 letter to the CIO appealing for it to enter meatpacking, as "workers in the industry already have expressed themselves as looking to you for help and assurance in their organizational efforts." It would have been a stunning reversal for Ellis to oppose joining the CIO six months later—a period which included the sit-down strike that subdued General Motors.¹

While Rachleff is correct that affiliation in Albert Lea occurred under duress, that decision did not force the rest of the IUAW to join the CIO. In fact, there were long debates over this issue in each unit of the IUAW, in accordance with the union's democratic practices. In unit after unit, a majority of workers voted to join the CIO. Why did they do so?

From what we know of these debates, the lines were not militant localism versus bureaucratic industrial unionism. Advocates of affiliation tried to expand Austin's workers awareness of class by linking them to a broader workers movement. They contended (I believe correctly) that the balance of power between employers and workers could only be altered through working class solidarity on a national scale. They fought against the idea, which had currency among Austin packing-house workers, that a separate accommodation could be worked out with owner Jay Hormel. Instead, they argued that any accommodation with Hormel would be fleeting without establishing unions throughout America's meatpacking industry. Organizing workers in major packing centers like Chicago and Kansas City was beyond the resources of the IUAW; therefore, they needed help. And the CIO was the only instrument available for this purpose.

Moreover, it only was after becoming part of the CIO that Austin workers helped to complete the unionization of their neighbors. Much like the Barberton, Ohio workers in John Borsos' essay, the structures of the labor movement did not sunder ties generated by community and family. It simply isn't true, as Rachleff and Lynd contend, that entering the CIO isolated Austin's meatpackers from workers in other trades. Unionization of small businesses in Austin was far from complete in 1937. It was a renewed campaign in the early 1940s, with the full support of packinghouse workers, that consolidated unionism in the town's small retail and transportation-related firms.

Austin also played a decisive role in the establishment of a democratic national union in meatpacking. Austin spearheaded the campaign by local unions which forced the CIO to grant an international union

¹Joe Voorhees to John Brophy, Nov. 24, 1936, CIO Secretary-Treasurer Papers, Box 65, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

charter in 1943. When Frank Ellis became vice-president of the United Packinghouse Workers (UPWA) at its founding convention, he symbolized the fusion between the grassroots workers revolt of the 1930s and the industrial union movement. Austin remained a progressive force in the UPWA for the next quarter century, with its members contributing enormous sums during national strikes and its leaders participating in the unions' dominant center-left bloc. Rather than being extinguished, the spirit of the IUAW profoundly influenced industrial unionism in meatpacking.

Austin's workers did become less militant and confrontational after World War II. But this had more to do with their successful local accommodation with Jay Hormel than anything intrinsic to the structure of national industrial unionism.

Leaving Rachleff's article aside, others essays also suffer analytically from the collection's polarities. John Borsos' essay actually supports a contrary thesis, the continued vitality of local unions well after the "heroic" 1930s. His picture of pragmatic union militants should have resulted in a call for more research on the culture of postwar local unionism rather than another indictment of the CIO. Michal Kozura's intriguing study of illegal mining would have been better framed by a James Scott "Weapons of the Weak" interpretation than pressed into service as evidence against national unionism. But the complexities hinted at in these articles do not find expression in the collection's intellectual superstructure.

My reading of the 1930s is different than Rachleff and Lynd. I see initiatives to connect local struggles with a national movement as part of a project to advance class consciousness, and to show that seemingly local indignities actually were problems shared by other workers. And I consider initiatives to unite the established labor movement with the grass roots workers revolt of the early 1930s as an astute, strategic effort to translate militant yet uneven local struggles into a movement that could affect American politics and society.

If we see flaws in this accomplishment (and there are many), our explanations need to pay closer attention to what workers truly wanted. Blaming the CIO isn't a sufficient explanation anymore.

Can We All Be Leaders?

by
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The essays assembled by Staughton Lynd under the title *"We Are All Leaders": The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s* form an important new book about working class organization during the Great Depression. *"We Are All Leaders"* is a strongly felt celebration of frequently overlooked local labor movements. The book presents a wealth of evidence about working people who organized whole communities and in doing so generated, at least for a short time, a class-conscious solidarity that often dissolved factional and ethnic differences, and on occasion even diminished racial prejudices. *"We Are All Leaders"* should be read by all labor historians for the richness of its details about working people's responses to the Great Depression. Its authors consistently highlight the intelligence, imagination, and class-conscious militancy of the workers who created insurgencies that altered the balance of power in local industrial relations and local politics in the 1930s.

"We Are All Leaders" consists of Staughton Lynd's overview introduction; six original essays by Rosemary Feurer (St. Louis nutpickers), Janet Irons (southern textile workers), Eric Davin (independent labor politics), Michael Kozura (Pennsylvania anthracite miners), John Borsos (Barberton, Ohio industrial workers), and Stan Weir (West Coast seamen); and three previously published pieces by Peter Rachleff (mid-western meatpackers), Mark Naison (Southern Tenant Farmers Union), and Elizabeth Faue (Minneapolis labor movement). Together these authors present a very strong case for the historical importance of widespread independent local unionism in previously unorganized industries before the formation of the CIO in November 1935.

Like other community studies such as those published by Gary Gerstle, Lizabeth Cohen, and myself in the 1980s, this new collection insists on the temporal primacy of local activists and organizations in the rise of labor during the Great Depression. Moreover, like earlier community studies, *"We Are All Leaders"* presents this local activism as inspiring an evolving working class consciousness that defined itself as both in opposition to corporate power and potentially open to all who labored for wages. The essays in *"We Are All Leaders"* are united

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by subject matter and by the shared politics of its authors. Here I want to treat this collection as it seems to be intended, as a book designed to advance a very clearly stated argument. In Staughton Lynd's words (which echo throughout the whole collection):

The evidence suggests the horizontal style of unionism described in these essays remains a permanent alternative for the labor movement . . . Top-down national union structures patterned on the corporation have failed. Local unions and their rank-and-file members, again prepared to be "all leaders," are needed to develop new forms of alternative unionism. We will not know if it is possible unless we try (16-18).

In the remainder of this essay, I will focus on the impact of this present-minded political orientation on the historical interpretations offered in the collection.

"We Are All Leaders" is clearly activist scholarship written by people (not all of them professional historians) who want to make a difference in the 1990s; by people who want to find in the past a model for effectively organizing working class opposition to corporate power today. All of the contributors are committed to writing history from the bottom up. They reject a recent trend in labor history, perhaps best exemplified in the work of Steve Fraser, Melvyn Dubofsky, Nelson Lichtenstein, and Robert Zieger, towards a revival of leadership studies that present complex and often sympathetic interpretations of the emergence of national industrial unions in the late 1930s and 1940s. The contributors to *"We Are All Leaders"* stress the ways that Depression-era unions and labor politics emerged out of local circumstances. They generally have no sympathy for what is consistently presented as the repressive "bureaucratic unionism" practiced in both the CIO and the AFL. Instead, the contributors share the conviction that the locally controlled labor movements of the years 1933-1936—what they variously describe as "community-based unions," "horizontal organization," "solidarity unionism," or simply "alternative unionism"—were a far more democratic and thus more desirable outcome of working class militancy than the national unions that ultimately triumphed in the period 1937-1948.

To make this case, the authors of *"We Are All Leaders"* present convincing evidence that local working people were mobilized by small groups of activists (including a significant number of Communists, Socialists, and ex-Wobblies), that successful local unions often had strong ties to non-union community groups, and that the evolution of local working class consciousness inspired industrial militancy and independence in politics. So far so good. But to be frank, on the interpretative level, there is not much that is really new here. Only Rosemary Feurer's and Elizabeth Faue's emphases on the importance of recognizing how community group connections were more likely to bring women into

local labor movements, thus increasing the chances of success, adds significantly to the prevailing interpretative pattern constructed by labor historians in the 1970s and 1980s.

"We Are All Leaders" is a passionate book, and the passions of its authors do much to enliven these essays. But these passions also detract from the quality of historical interpretation in this volume. I certainly share the authors' frustrations with the failure of most AFL-CIO unions to protect American workers from recent corporate assaults on living standards, working conditions, and social security that have been carried on in the name of "competitiveness" and "globalization." And I agree that like-minded historians should search the past for knowledge that will help us to better understand the current political economy and devise ways to counter its destructive impact on workers' lives. But I cannot agree with the hostility which most of these essays display towards the CIO unions of the 1930s and early 1940s.

Reading *"We Are All Leaders"* conveys the impression that CIO unions and leaders like John L. Lewis, Sidney Hillman, and Philip Murray were workers' enemies during the Great Depression. For the most part, successful CIO unions of the 1930s and 1940s get no credit for raising workers' living standards, protecting workers from arbitrary management decisions, improving safety on the job, or providing workers with limited economic security. Indeed, the implication here is that these national unions and their leaders were most often destroyers of all that was good in the local union movements. This interpretation is wrong. It seems to flow directly from the authors' assumption that bureaucracy is always repressive, always against the interests of working people. Such an assumption is ridiculously ahistorical and a serious impediment to discovering the historical truth about the 1930s (and our own times). Despite editor Lynd's disclaimer, "we recognize that uncoordinated local disturbances could not have substituted for a national movement" (15), the essays in this volume do not even consider the possibility that some form of coordinated centralized organization was necessary for unions to preserve the gains workers were making in the 1930s.

The national leaders of the CIO and its member unions faced two sets of difficult and closely related problems which most of the authors of *"We Are All Leaders"* choose not to acknowledge. First, those leaders had to work within a political and legal system which historically had always been anti-union, a system in which a Congressional majority and the President were (as we can now see so clearly) *only momentarily* supportive of unionization in the years 1935-37. Those leaders also had to cope with the bitter attacks launched by the AFL unions, and the AFL leadership's nasty political alliance with Republicans and racist anti-union Southern Democrats. Secondly, the CIO union leaders had

to deal with the fissures in local labor movements; and most importantly with the fact that most white workers did not want black workers brought into the labor movement as equals, while most black workers were understandably skeptical about bi-racial unionism. Moreover, at the local level AFL attacks on the CIO often reinforced the line taken by businessmen, corporate officials, and Republican politicians. The split between the AFL and the CIO was cast as anti-communists versus red sympathizers, as whites versus blacks; and local workers often lined up accordingly. In this collection of essays, only Rosemary Feurer and Peter Rachleff begin to describe this local historical dynamic and the way it ran counter to the solidarity-making process that *"We Are All Leaders"* celebrates.

In the last 10 years, the work of many historians including Nell Painter, Robin Kelley, Earl Lewis, David Roediger, Joe Trotter, and Bruce Nelson have made it very clear that race divided workers more often than a commitment to racial equality united them. If I were rewriting the second half of my own *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus* today, I could not ignore (as I did over 10 years ago) the significance of racism and racial identities in the bitter divisions within the UAW in Flint in the late 1930s. Thus, I have struggled to understand how this volume could have been put together recently without considering questions of race more comprehensively.

The authors' nostalgia for the defeated and disappeared alternative unionism, and their hope that something like that alternative can be recreated in the late 1990s seem mostly to blame for this error. These emotions are especially at work in the pieces that rely heavily on the memories of a handful of informants. In Stan Weir's autobiographical piece, "Union Leaders That Stay on the Job," nostalgia for what was lost and resentment against union bureaucrats overwhelms all pretence of objectivity. Weir's essay is pure memoir, not scholarship. As such it is thoroughly engaging, but it should not be trusted as reliable history. Much of what Weir presents is dialogue, imaginatively reconstructed 50 years or more after the events it describes. It is a memory, worked and reworked in its author's mind until its "truth"—that rank-and-file control at the worksite is the only guarantee of workers' power and union democracy—gleams like a polished gemstone. Undoubtedly this is what Weir believes his experiences in the Sailors' Union of the Pacific and in the Oakland general strike of 1946 mean; but in the absence of other confirming sources, his story is not history.

A much more subtle nostalgia influences John Borsos' history of Barberton, Ohio's industrial union movement raising questions about his interpretation that he does not seem to recognize. Borsos' account of strikes and political activity is amply documented by a combination

of written sources and oral history evidence, so it seems a convincing picture of a local movement which sustained high levels of militancy and solidarity over a significant period of time. But in a critical place early in his piece, while trying to explain how Barberton could have both "resilient" ethnic and African-American communities (240), and also develop a movement that seemed able to unite these communities, Borsos offers only this one unsubstantiated bit of oral history testimony — "Our gang walked to Highland Junior High School, there was a Black boy, a Jewish boy, a couple of Slovaks, and a hillbilly, who all walked together" (241). This memory gem is surely the way one worker activist now remembers his youth, but would the others whom he recalls as part of "our gang" remember it similarly? Furthermore, even if they did, does this mean that the kind of alternative unionism Borsos describes as enduring to the 1950s could really only develop and survive in small towns where this ideal type of intergroup mixing was built into everyday life, or in places that were racially homogeneous?

Actually, the answer to this last question might be yes. Certainly it is striking that five of the eight specific examples of alternative unionism presented in this book arose in these types of settings (in southern mill towns, small agricultural processing centers in the upper Midwest, among southern sharecroppers, anthracite mining villages, and in Barberton), and in a sixth example, among Stan Weir's shipmates, also a very small confined population. It is also notable that in one of the book's two case studies of big city developments, St. Louis' All Workers Union, the alternative union collapsed in less than a year as white workers rejected affiliation in favor of all white AFL unions. I don't want to push this line of thought too far, but it is tempting to suggest that the nostalgia for alternative unionism expressed throughout this book may also be a nostalgia for an America of small towns and small cities. If this is true, the authors might be looking in the wrong direction to find a model for organizing in today's America of gargantuan metropolitan areas and sprawling edge cities and automobile suburbs.

Michael Kozura's essay reveals another pitfall of the mixture of nostalgia and hope that give this volume its powerful emotional appeal. Kozura initially presents us with a wonderfully detailed and sophisticated account of the development of what he calls "the moral economy" of bootleg mining — the illegal but fairly widespread practice of unemployed workers who for years mined and marketed anthracite coal taken from eastern Pennsylvania seams abandoned by their corporate owners. But then he allows the voices of just a few oral history informants to predominate. So his essay moves on to a presentation of the (self-defined) heroic stands taken by these activists and their supporters against corporate attempts to strip mine the lands claimed by the bootleggers. Kozura

concludes his piece with these unattributed words. "We [the bootleggers] were defiant. We stood our ground" (227). But, I might add, they ultimately lost and disappeared.

The nostalgia at work in "*We Are All Leaders*" prompts all but one of the authors to highlight the victories of local activists while paying very little attention to the processes which in almost every case resulted in the complete collapse of the alternative union movement. As one who has used oral history extensively, and who has perhaps more than once been guilty of this error, I have been hesitant to pursue this line of criticism in print. But I am growing increasingly uncomfortable with the way so many of us have been constructing a picture of the past that relies so heavily on oral history. Surely defeat is not victory, no matter how unbowed the heads of the defeated. Yet, as we all should know by the way white Southerners for so long wrote their histories of the Civil War, the memories of the defeated survivors often transmute their own experiences into a kind of triumph. We labor historians must be constantly alert to this process, and avoid the tendency to allow only victims and the defeated (no matter how much we empathize with them) to provide us with the words we use to describe the past.

In this volume, only Eric Davin's fine essay, "The Defeat of the Labor Party Idea," seems willing to embrace the totality of the collapse of alternative unionism and local labor parties, and then explore the history of that collapse. Drawing on both national sources and local materials from Akron and New Bedford, Davin clearly demonstrates the continuing vitality of independent labor politics in early 1936, but he also clearly shows that workers themselves were very much divided about the need for an independent party. Thus Davin's argument that the Labor Non-Partisan League was a vehicle used by John L. Lewis and Sidney Hillman to repress independent labor party movements appears nuanced, and open to the possibility that LNPL had this repressive effect because *a majority of working class voters were persuaded* (not bludgeoned) to support Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal in November 1936.

Unlike Davin, instead of dissecting what did happen to make alternative unionism disappear, most of the authors of this collection prefer to ask the reader to imagine what might have happened if locally controlled, class-conscious unionism had survived the Roosevelt recession of 1937-38, the bitter organizational rivalry between the AFL and CIO, the formation of the powerful reactionary coalition of Republicans and Southern Democrats in Congress, and the requirements of the warfare state of the 1940s. Of course, given the way in which this counterfactual question emerges within essays that display strong animus towards any form of hierarchical organization, there is only one possible answer:

the unrealized alternative would have been much better than what actually resulted. Unfortunately, this way of thinking takes us away from the difficult work of determining why the United States got the kind of rival labor movements it did in the 1930s and 1940s.

Like the authors of this collection, I am emotionally stirred by the idea that we all can be leaders. But the history I know teaches me that this ideal form of democracy only flourishes in local movements for a brief time before the movement either combines with other similar movements in some hierarchical fashion, preferably representative government, in order to protect its gains; or it dissolves under the pressures of the interests in society who oppose it, factional enthusiasms, and the desire of most participants to get on with the rest of their lives. Over the long run, the working people I know and I have studied generally want to delegate power to leaders who will honestly and courageously represent their interests. Indeed, many of these workers when confronted with confusing and frightening circumstances like a Great Depression or rampaging global corporations want to be led by someone who seems to understand what can be done, and who is willing to take risks doing it. The desire of so many workers to be led by such a leader is not failing; it is a very human attribute that helps explain, for example, the enormous influence John L. Lewis and Franklin D. Roosevelt wielded in working class communities during the Great Depression.

The authors of *"We Are All Leaders"* hope that a revival of some form of the alternative unionism of the 1930s will be able to force today's global corporations to make decisions that promote greater economic and racial equality, and environmental safety. This does not seem to me to be a valid lesson of the Great Depression. The split in the labor movement and widespread white racism prevented CIO leaders and progressive Democrats from achieving a more comprehensive reform of the political economy when the opportunity arose in the years 1935–1937. Today, to successfully reform corporations more powerful than those of the 1930s, American working people will have to be truly united at the local and national levels. In the current global political-economy, only powerful well-led national labor movements linked up to each other and to national political parties will be able to amass the power necessary to curb the destructive policies of global corporations. We all cannot be leaders, but so what? There is no shame in being a foot soldier in an army dedicated to social justice.

The Historical Significance of Rank-and-File Unionism

by
Cecelia F. Bucki*

The current weak state of the labor movement has caused many activists to despair and many historians to search out the roots of that weakness. The purpose of this volume is to look for "a qualitatively different unionism" as a model for the present and future (2). The authors and editor find such a model in the "alternative unionism" achieved in the early 1930s, before the centralized and bureaucratic structure of the CIO overshadowed all. It's a tricky business to base historical interpretations on what might have been, but the editor is quick to point out that the authors are not speculating about "might-have-beens" but calling attention to "facts that have been disregarded" (2). I might add that exciting initiatives by the new AFL-CIO leadership lend new urgency to the search for such models.

We must first focus on what has been revealed in this welcome gathering of research on grass-roots initiatives in the early 1930s. The anthology reflects the immense energy and creativity of working class men and women in this era. Reminiscent of the World War I upsurge, the early 1930s was defined by workers' impulse toward self-organization (that is, not waiting for the AFL to send funds or organizers), city-wide "One Big Union"-type movements, and a rejection of skilled/unskilled, male/female, black/white dichotomies, all labeled by the volume as "alternative unionism." Particularly intriguing were the community-wide unions of Austin and Albert Lea, Minnesota (Rachleff), and Barberton, Ohio (Borsos), which presented marvelous examples of working-class organizing prowess. Marginal workers, like the black women nutpickers in St. Louis (Feurer) and southern sharecroppers (Naison), also succeeded in organizing themselves. Anthracite miners took matters into their own hands and bootlegged coal, justifying their expropriation of corporate property with a community-based moral economy and practical "organization of insurgency" (Kozura).

We find, however, that these unions sprung up in different places through different dynamics, some of which depended on previous AFL formations, some which received impetus from federal action like the National Industrial Recovery Act, which became law in 1933 (Borsos:

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Barberton workers were encouraged by passage of the NIRA and used the AFL city body, the Central Labor Union, to begin organizing), some which relied on Communist Party (CP) initiatives (Feurer's study points to CP-inspired Unemployed Councils) and some which were destroyed by CP machinations (Naison's 1968 study of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union). Others were the result of particular industry dynamics (Kozura's anthracite miners). Thus, the reader finds no one pattern to the emergence of this alternative unionism, except that all displayed a strong blend of rank-and-file democracy and a wide community base. Moreover, not all of these formations collapsed or were subverted in a similar manner, and one was the inspiration for a successful CIO union, the United Electrical Workers (UE) in St. Louis which continued to rely on a community-based method of organizing. Presumably, this would exempt the UE from the damning charge of this volume as a CIO national bureaucratic union which quashed rank-and-file community unionism.

A faltering step is taken with the switch to an analysis of alternative politics, which is given a narrow definition in Davin's study of Labor Parties. Davin provides a definitive summary of this well-trod ground and adds new information, but in defining alternative politics as *only* an independent labor party he neglects the many avenues to political power employed by workers in this era. Indeed, he neglects his own findings of labor politics in steel towns of the Monongahela Valley where labor activists used the vehicle of the Democratic Party to unseat Republican incumbents who had done steel companies' bidding for many years.¹ While some state labor organizations achieved a third party, for most others there was the continued impediment of a winner-take-all system, of labor leaders beholden to one of the two major parties and local workers tied through ethnicity to one of the major parties. (Note, though, that the Connecticut Federation of Labor did *not* endorse a labor party, contrary to the statement on page 15.) Even if a third party won power locally, as the Bridgeport (Connecticut) Socialist Party did in 1933, it could only effect change if it bargained with the holders of political power on the state level and with the local business leaders who were in charge of the city's welfare infrastructure.

It is here that we may take the measure of David Montgomery's suggestion that federal labor agencies, and friendly state and local officials, while setting out to transform industrial life, also empowered workers to act collectively on their own behalf in the work arena, an opening that workers exploited. An opposite trajectory occurred in

¹Davin, "The Littlest New Deal: How Democracy and the Union Came to Western Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania History* (forthcoming).

matters of social policy, and here workers lost their fight to open up the charity system to worker and public control.² My own research has indicated that the political forays that workers made onto the local and state political scene sometimes succeeded in their winning office, but the machinery of welfare, relief, and often taxes was kept largely out of elected hands. Two articles in the anthology make passing reference to the local struggle over the business-controlled Community Fund (Feurer's study of St. Louis, page 29) or Community Chest (Rachleff's study of Austin, Minn. workers, pages 54–55), but in the context of spurring on the organizing movement at the workplace. However, debates over taxes, relief payments, and business control over charity were crucial to workers' stance vis à vis local, state, and national elected officials. Indeed, the United Mine Workers Union struggles with the Red Cross and the CIO's support of the Lundeen social welfare bill were related in that both aimed to give unions some control over public and private welfare systems.³

Thus, there is one large disappointment in this collection, that the authors and editor concentrated on the workplace to the exclusion of other arenas of contestation. More could have been made of the hints in Feuerer's fine study of St. Louis or Borsos's excellent portrait of Barberton that larger community issues were key to the success of community unionism. The volume is burdened with what I consider a false dichotomy between community-based rank-and-file unionism and bureaucratic national unionism. The real historical question is what was gained or lost in the creation of a national labor movement in the 1930s and 1940s, not whether a bureaucratic national union movement is responsible for today's debilitated labor power. Bureaucracy is easy to blame (a well-deserved blame, in most cases), but the reality is that there were a multiplicity of working-class voices, including conservative ones, along with racial and ethnic splits, all of which threatened the unity and strength of an emergent labor movement in the 1930s, regardless of how it was structured. Nowhere does this volume examine the fragility, limitations, and contingent process of organizational formation which marked the labor movement in these years. Little attention is paid to ethnic antagonisms, though that was one of the components

²David Montgomery, "Labor and the Political Leadership of New Deal America," *International Review of Social History*, 39 (1994), 335–360.

³Kenneth Casebeer, "The Workers' Unemployment Insurance Bill: American Social Wage, Labor Organization, and Legal Ideology," in Christopher L. Tomlins and Andrew J. King, eds., *Labor Law in America: Historical and Critical Essays* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 231–259; Bucki, "The Workers' State: Municipal Policy, Class and Taxes in the Early Depression," in Eric Arnesen, Julie Greene, and Bruce Laurie, eds., *Labor Histories: Class, Politics, and the Working-Class Experience* (forthcoming, University of Illinois Press).

of a renewed conservative politics in the Roosevelt recession of 1937–38.⁴ Similarly, race in industrial settings is given short shrift, though that was often the flashpoint for undesirable rank-and-file activities.⁵ Some attention in the anthology has been given to the question of gender (Feurer, Faue), and it is clear that the path taken did marginalize women's voices.

In the final analysis, stripped of its polemical intent, this volume contributes to our growing understanding of the alternatives fashioned by working people themselves in the nadir of economic depression. This suggests to us a *working-class* variant of "New Deal liberalism," one that embraced the possibilities for another approach to government economic regulation than the commercial Keynesianism that was finally implemented. And that, as a reply to those who see workers' consciousness in the 1930s as essentially conservative and pragmatic, is a useful corrective.

RESPONSE

by
Staughton Lynd*

We are gratified that the commentators acknowledge the existence of the "alternative unionism" described in our essays, even if they question its importance. The critics seem less willing, however, to recognize that these alternative union movements were often actively suppressed by union officials who perceived them as a threat. Thus Janet Irons argues that the 1934 textile strike in the South was far stronger than has been recognized, but that national union leaders became frightened of their own rank and file, and imposed a meaningless settlement. Yet Irons' essay is almost completely ignored in the comments.

⁴For the renewed influence of conservative ethnic elites, see Bucki, "Workers and Politics in the Immigrant City in the Early Twentieth-Century United States," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 48 (1995), 40–42; Ronald H. Bayor, *Neighbors in Conflict: The Irish, Germans, Jews, and Italians of New York City, 1929–1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

⁵For example, the "hate strikes" of the war years. Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 125–35; August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1979), 121–36; Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 154–55.

**We Are All Leaders* consists of an introduction by myself and essays by Rosemary Feuerer, Peter Rachleff, Janet Irons, Mark Naison, Eric Davin, Elizabeth Faue, Michael Kozura, John Borsos, and Stan Weir. This Response contains input from other contributors as well as myself.

Historians may be blind to evidence of worker "self-activity" because of the frame of reference out of which they operate. Ronald Edsforth frankly admits his belief that working people generally prefer to follow a leader than to engage in self-organization. Other comments assert that the essays in *"We Are All Leaders"* pay too little attention to the "fragility, limitations, and contingent process" of organizing efforts in the 1930s (Bucki), or to "opposition and/or indifference to labor-based activism" among workers in the Depression decade (Zieger). If we understand the critics correctly, this supposed reluctance to organize partially justified the creation of centralized CIO unions.

In fact, one of the themes of *"We Are All Leaders"* is that workers previously viewed as apathetic showed themselves to be anything but that in the early 1930s. Certainly this is the case for the southern textile workers described by Irons. The fact that they built strong, militant union locals should cause historians to question judgments like that of Sidney Hillman, who based his organizing agenda for the South in the late 1930s on the assessment that southern textile workers were incapable of strong union organization.¹

The purpose of this Response is to encourage labor activists and scholars to make their own independent evaluation of *"We Are All Leaders"* by reading the book.

I

"We Are All Leaders" was in part inspired by a comment of David Brody's. Writing on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the CIO, Brody chastised those who have argued that it could have been otherwise. "Rich though the scholarly findings have been," he stated, "they have not brought forth one essential for historical reformulation: they have not revealed the alternative that rivaled the union course that was actually taken."²

As the contributors to what became *"We Are All Leaders"* began to undertake what Brody challenged us to do, namely, to articulate an alternative, we were at pains to emphasize that no one can say with certainty what was or was not possible in the past. We stressed that we were not speculating about what might have been but "direct[ing] attention to facts that have been disregarded."³ Still, we were accused

¹For an insightful analysis of Hillman's thinking in this regard, see Steven Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 373-391.

²David Brody, "The CIO after 50 Years: A Historical Reckoning," *Dissent*, 32 (1985), 470, quoted in John Borsos, "We Make You This Appeal in the Name of Every Union Man and Woman in Barberton," *"We Are All Leaders,"* 238.

³Introduction, 2.

of speculating about counter-factuals rather than doing real history. This was and is a Catch 22.

Other scholars, including some of our critics, have also described a vibrant decentralized community-based unionism in the 1930s. For example, Gary Gerstle richly chronicles the successful experience of the Independent Textile Union in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. As opposed to the proliferation of full-time officers and staff representatives encouraged by the national CIO, the ITU did not hire a full-time organizer until 1943, 12 years after it was founded. And in contrast to the mechanical seniority that came to be practiced in CIO unions, ITU contracts provided that all union members past the probationary period should share equally in whatever work was available. Gerstle concludes, "The only realistic, programmatic option for a radical . . . in 1930s Woonsocket involved . . . building the CIO, and extending the New Deal." We propose that his own facts can be set in a different interpretive framework.⁴

Contrary to Roger Horowitz, we do not ignore the continuing vitality of local unions. We say, and demonstrate, that "the spirit of alternative unionism often carried over into the strongest *local* unions of the emerging CIO."⁵ UAW Local 156 in Flint as described by Ronald Edsforth was just such a union. Between February 1937 when the Flint sit-down strike was settled and June 1937, when John L. Lewis, Homer Martin, and John Brophy deliberately destroyed it, Local 156 functioned as "a kind of general workers union that offered advice and direct assistance to any group of workers who asked for it." Among the workers who received strike support, and in "almost all" cases actually became members of Local 156, were workers at auto parts and accessories shops, mechanics at five automobile dealerships, construction workers, truck drivers, clerks at the city's biggest grocery chains, dry cleaners and laundry workers, waiters and waitresses, postal telegraph messengers, and local utility company workers.⁶

Similarly Nelson Lichtenstein (citing Elizabeth Faue) writes that UAW Local 174 in Detroit, the West Side local headed by Walter Reuther,

expressed the very real sense of class solidarity felt by the more activist elements within the UAW. In its early years the West Side local was as

⁴See Introduction, 2, 3, 12–13, 24 n.55, citing Gary Gerstle, *Working Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 143, 145, 81–82, 269–70.

⁵Introduction, 5 (emphasis in original). The examples given are UE Local 601 at Westinghouse near Pittsburgh, URW Local 5 in Akron, SWOC Local 1010 at Inland Steel, and a UAW local in Chicago to which Sylvia Woods belonged during World War II.

⁶Ronald Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of a Consumer Society in Flint, Michigan* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 181–183.

much a community organization as a collective bargaining institution. Workers frequently switched jobs among the many small metal fabrication shops, which were themselves embedded in the neighborhoods of closely-spaced wood frame houses that characterized Detroit's working-class districts. Local 174 backed West Side rent strikes and organized a union auxiliary for those employed in New Deal work relief programs. Reuther therefore saw the mixed character of Local 174 as an embodiment of his vision of the union movement, in which collective bargaining and political mobilization were organically and fruitfully linked.⁷

Thus the alternative unionism that we counterpose to the bureaucratic business unionism of the national CIO existed not only in pre-CIO formations such as the Independent Textile Union in Woonsocket, Rhode Island (as described by Gary Gerstle), or the Independent Union of All Workers in Austin, Minnesota (as described by both Peter Rachleff and Roger Horowitz), but also for a time in certain CIO local unions such as UAW Local 156 (as described by Ronald Edsforth), UAW Local 174 (as described by Nelson Lichtenstein), Local 601 of the United Electrical Workers (as described by David Montgomery and Ronald Schatz), and Local 1010 of SWOC at Inland Steel in northern Indiana (as described by Elizabeth Cohen, and by John Sargent and Nick Migas in *Rank and File*).⁸

It is spurious to disregard such evidence on the ground that it does not involve "central core workers" (Zieger). The local unions just mentioned, five of them discussed in "*We Are All Leaders*," were in the textile, meatpacking, automobile, electrical, and steel industries. Almost half of Eric Davin's lengthy essay is an in-depth case study of labor politics among rubber workers in Akron. The other half of Davin's essay is a similar examination of politics in New Bedford, Massachusetts, where a 26-week strike in 1928 caused 662 strikers to be indicted and prompted Daniel DeLeon's most famous essay, *What Means This Strike?*⁹ The remaining pieces in "*We Are All Leaders*" deal with meatpacking (Rachleff), cotton textile manufacture and tenant farming (Irons, Naison),

⁷Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 97.

⁸See Introduction, 5-6, citing David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 319, 322, 457, Ronald W. Schatz, *The Electrical Workers: A History of Labor at General Electric and Westinghouse, 1923-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 73, Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 306, and John Sargent, "Your Dog Don't Bark No More" and Nick Migas, "How the International Took Over," in Alice and Staughton Lynd, eds., *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988) 97-102, 155-167.

⁹Norman Tallentire, "Bay State Justice: Trial of 662 New Bedford Workers," *The Labor Defender* (Dec. 1928).

parts of the mining and rubber industries (Kozura, Borsos), the cities of St. Louis and Minneapolis (Feurer, Faue) and seafaring (Weir). Soft coal miners and truckdrivers are presumably central core workers. Their involvement in alternative unionism is documented below.

We suggest that the countervailing entities which we call alternative unions were not confined to the social margin. They included large, flagship local unions that were threatening to the national CIO for precisely that reason.

II

Of course, the mere existence of militant and democratic local unions does not demonstrate that they represented a full-fledged alternative to national industrial unions in the 1930s, or that they do today. The Introduction to *"We Are All Leaders"* states: "we recognize that uncoordinated local disturbances could not have substituted for a national movement."¹⁰

Our book suggests that one way of dismissing the alternative unionism of the early 1930s is to say that

at the outset of large social movements there is often a period of mass enthusiasm, egalitarianism, and "primitive democracy" (the phrase was coined by Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb), but as the movement grows and settles down to its serious tasks, an efficient centralized bureaucracy inevitably takes over. In this view the bureaucratized business union movement that the CIO had become by 1950 was natural and inevitable.¹¹

This appears to be precisely the view of the present commentators. Thus Edsforth writes:

Like the authors of this collection, I am emotionally stirred by the idea that we all can be leaders. But the history I know teaches me that this ideal form of democracy only flourishes in local movements for a brief time before the movement either combines with other similar movements in some hierarchical fashion . . . or it dissolves. . . .

Yet there are many indications that the CIO could have maintained its organizational integrity in a far more democratic and decentralized manner. Although one would never guess it from his comment on *"We Are All Leaders,"* Robert Zieger himself has suggested that the CIO need not have organized in the form of national, single-industry unions. Zieger wrote in his biography of John L. Lewis:

At times it seemed that labor organizations that embraced all workers in a given locale, rather than merely those in a given industry or trade,

¹⁰Introduction, 15.

¹¹Introduction, 7.

made the most sense in the crackling atmosphere of the mid-1930s. The CIO, claimed some laborites, should revert to the promiscuous organizing of the old Knights of Labor of the 1880s and abandon—or at least modify—the practice of organizing by plant or industry.¹²

In his book on the CIO Zieger devoted six pages to the structural options among which the CIO leadership chose. In the spring of 1937 that leadership decided to charter Local Industrial Unions directly affiliated to the national body. These LIUs replicated what the AFL called federal unions, the entities that often pioneered industrial union organization before 1935 (and in places like Barberton, Ohio, continued to do so for years thereafter). By fall 1937 the LIUs had 225,000 members and paid more dues to the CIO than did the members of CIO national unions. Zieger even cites Austin and Woonsocket for the proposition that in some parts of the country “a sort of regional unionism did take hold [in which] meatpacking and textile workers, respectively, spear-headed successful communitywide mobilizations of their areas’ working class.”¹³

The fact that the CIO leaders decided against the regional union option—or as Zieger puts it, that John L. Lewis “paid no heed to these notions”¹⁴—hardly makes it ridiculously ahistorical to ask what might have happened had, say, UAW Local 156 been allowed to go on developing in the way that it was already growing in the second quarter of 1937.

Another critical moment of decision in the UAW came in November 1937. 2500 night shift workers at GM’s Fisher Body plant in Pontiac, Michigan occupied the factory to protest the transfer of much of their work to a nonunion facility in Linden, New Jersey. When GM dismissed four leading activists, the strikers welded the gates shut and moved in blankets and food.

The strike at Pontiac Fisher Body marked a high point in rank-and-file militancy during the formative years of the UAW. It demonstrated that layoffs, even the specter of unemployment, had hardly crippled the will to fight. . . . Despite the caution of its own top leadership, CIO trade unionism had . . . put powerful weapons, both ideological and collective, into the hands of workers at the point of production. . . . [W]orkers saw their new contract, their new grievance procedure, and their budding shop organization as a charter of rights and entitlements whose violation demanded a massive, immediate response. . . . Within days Pontiac seemed on the verge of turning into another Flint.

¹²Robert H. Zieger, *John L. Lewis: Labor Leader* (Boston: Twayne, 1988), 85.

¹³Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 66–71, especially 68.

¹⁴Zieger, *Lewis*, 85.

The UAW executive board met in almost continuous session to decide what to do about the Pontiac sit-down.

Whether it won or lost, UAW authorization of the Pontiac wildcat strike would have represented a huge gamble, a lunge toward union power and a syndicalist-flavored industrial democracy at the nation's most powerful corporation. Even at this late hour, a factory social order of the sort that had given UAW stewards dual power at Kelsey-Hayes, Midland Steel, and Dodge Main now seemed within grasp, *if only there were spirits bold enough to seize it* [emphasis added].¹⁵

Surely in this passage Lichtenstein seems to suggest that alternative unionism was historically possible. But in the event, pressure from John L. Lewis and the national Communist Party combined to cause the Pontiac sit-down to fail. The same two forces had eviscerated previous rank-and-file initiatives in steel and meatpacking.¹⁶

Even after the national CIO opted for union jurisdictions defined by industry, there remained a live possibility that the center of gravity in the new CIO industrial unions would be in local unions, rather than in national offices. As late as the beginning of World War II, according to Lichtenstein, in many CIO unions there was still a "decentralized and local nexus of power." The UAW functioned as "a coalition of virtually autonomous locals." Management resisted company-wide bargaining "so each local played a large part in the annual negotiations." The UE was "an unintegrated coalition that reflected its origins as a federation of . . . locals." Even those unions that had originated as top-down CIO organizing committees showed strong centrifugal tendencies. In spring 1941 a coalition of 30 locals forced Van Bittner to resign as director of the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee. In the Steel Workers Organizing Committee, several locals demanded: 1. a 50-50 division of dues between the national and the local unions; 2. local strike funds; 3. the right to strike over local issues; and 4. election of staff representatives.¹⁷

¹⁵Lichtenstein, *Walter Reuther*, 119-120.

¹⁶Lewis "let the UAW executive board know that the Pontiac wildcat had to end." Top CP strategists perceived the wildcat as "an example of how Communist cadres in the industrial hinterland threatened to sabotage the tentative trust the party had won from CIO and Democratic Party leaders on the national scene. Browder therefore personally ordered the party's auto faction to end the sit-down [T]he handful of Communists in Pontiac abruptly repudiated their own leadership of the sit-down." *Ibid.*, 120-121. For steel, see Staughton Lynd, "The Possibility of Radicalism in the Early 1930s: The Case of Steel," in James Green, ed., *Workers' Struggles, Past and Present: A "Radical America" Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983); for meatpacking, Peter Rachleff, "The Independent Union of All Workers," *We Are All Leaders*, 65.

¹⁷Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 14-25.

This struggle of some CIO locals for a decentralized union structure reenacted the struggle of dissidents in the United Mine Workers, before the creation of the CIO, against the heavy-handed governance imposed by John L. Lewis. The Progressive Miners of America (PMA) originated in a 1932 contract dispute in Illinois. Every UMW local in Illinois demanded the sharing or "equalization" of available work, along with a substantial reduction in the length of the work week, "as a means of controlling the mechanization of the workplace and keeping operating mines in production." The operators insisted that existing hours and overtime should be continued, that the introduction of machinery should be accelerated, and that production should be concentrated at so-called efficient mines. In August 1932 the Illinois miners rejected this proposal two-to-one. The next month Lewis declared it adopted anyway. When the miners refused to go back to work, "John L. Lewis brought in strikebreakers from other districts to operate the mines under the new contract." Little wonder, then, that the Progressive Miners' platform specified that:

No miner could be elected to office in the PMA without having worked in the same mines for at least five years. Union organizers were appointed for a period of no more than four years and were not permitted to vote at union conventions. Provision was also made for the recall of elected officers and the calling of special conventions at the initiative of local unions.¹⁸

The struggle against UMW centralization necessarily continued in the nascent CIO. SWOC and PWOC were largely financed by the UMW, structured in the vertical manner of the UMW under John L. Lewis, and directed by appointed UMW officials (Philip Murray, David J. McDonald, Van Bittner). Other UMW appointees (Adolph Germer, John Brophy) carried the same template into the national CIO's dealings with other unions.

Yet outside as well as inside the CIO, alternatives were available not only to the *structure* of CIO unionism, but also to the *substance* of the CIO collective bargaining agreements that comprise what Brody terms its "workplace contractualism."¹⁹

The alternative unions of the early 1930s sometimes resisted written

¹⁸Carl D. Oblinger, *Divided Kingdom: Work, Community, and the Mining Wars in the Central Illinois Coal Fields During the Great Depression* (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Society, 1991), 5-9.

¹⁹David Brody, "Workplace Contractualism in Comparative Perspective," in Nelson Lichtenstein and Howell John Harris, eds., *Industrial Democracy in America: The Ambiguous Promise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 176.

collective bargaining agreements, so as to retain their freedom of action. At the Kelsey-Hayes shop where Detroit's first sit-down strike occurred, the workers "[l]ike the old Industrial Workers of the World . . . refused to sign a regular contract with the Kelsey management, relying instead on the minutes of the bargaining sessions between the plant manager and the stewards' committee Such arrangements naturally put a premium on a forceful shop-floor presence."²⁰

But it would be wrong to write off the achievements of the early 1930s as anti-contractual. Consider the work of Farrell Dobbs, a principal organizer of the Minneapolis General Strike of 1934, who thereafter negotiated a series of regional contracts on behalf of Local 574 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. In contrast to the first CIO contracts in auto and steel, the contracts of this AFL union beginning with the 1934 strike settlement and continuing to the end of the 1930s retained the unconditional right to strike. A "model contract" adopted by Local 574 as it began to organize over-the-road truckers provided for:

1. Annual contracts.
3. [N]o overtime until all employees on the job worked their full quota of regular hours.
5. Disputes over seniority standing to be settled by the union. The employer to have no voice in the matter.
6. Back pay owed to workers because of contract violations by the employer to be computed at two times the regular wage rate.
8. The union to retain the right to strike over employer violations of the working agreement.
9. No boss to order his employees to go through a picket line of a striking union.²¹

Contemporary alternatives existed to the no-strike and management prerogatives clauses that became typical of CIO collective bargaining agreements. It would seem *more* nuanced and *more* analytical to consider the full variety of options among which the 1930s labor movement made its choices, rather than merely accepting—I had almost said, celebrating—the particular institutional pattern that survived.

²⁰Lichtenstein, *Walter Reuther*, 72. Introduction, "We Are All Leaders," 5–6, gives other examples.

²¹Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion* (New York: Monad Press, 1972), 183 (1934 strike settlement); Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Power* (New York: Monad Press, 1973), 140–141 (model contract), 178–179, 208, 238–239 (1937, 1938, 1939 contracts). Judith Stepan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlin argue that Left-led CIO unions were slower than other CIO unions to adopt management prerogatives and no-strike clauses in their collective bargaining agreements. "Red' Unions and 'Bourgeois' Contracts?" *American Journal of Sociology*, 96(1991), 1151–1200.

III

Even the few allegations of factual error by the commentators turn out, on closer examination, essentially to arise from misreading or a difference in interpretation.

Roger Horowitz alleges that Peter Rachleff has misrepresented the process by which constituent local unions of the Industrial Union of All Workers came to be part of the CIO (and, as it turned out, in some cases the AFL). But in suggesting that Rachleff portrays the IUAW as single-mindedly opposed to CIO affiliation, Horowitz has set up a straw man. In fact Rachleff states:

The Hormel packinghouse activists who built and extended the Independent Union of All Workers wrestled with a complex problem. Hormel management insisted that raises given to their workers would have to be linked to raises achieved by packinghouse workers throughout the country. This pressure . . . led Austin activists to meet with packinghouse unionists from around the Midwest to discuss *linking up their activities, if not their organizations*. After the CIO was formed in 1935, *some of the activists contacted John L. Lewis and asked for his help*. In these efforts they continued to face a dilemma: how to build a cohesive national organization that would still rest on the local democracy and horizontal solidarity that had been the lifeblood of the IUAW.²²

Nor does Rachleff deny that Hormel packinghouse workers gained something from CIO affiliation.

The Hormel unit affiliated with the CIO, first directly [that is, as one of the Local Industrial Unions described by Zieger] and then with the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee, when it was established. Key local leaders joined the regional or national union staff and left Austin. By World War II, a group of "straight trade unionists" had assumed the leadership of the Hormel union. Together, these diverse activists did indeed help build the strong national industrial union organization they felt they needed. They also helped ensure excellent wages and working conditions for two generations of Hormel workers.²³

But Rachleff also insists that "something very important was lost" when the IUAW came to an end. IUAW activists did *not* want the dismemberment of their organization that was (as Horowitz concedes) forced on them in March 1937, just as UAW Local 156 protested its dissolution from above three months later.²⁴ Horowitz sees a uni-directional story, with all roads leading to a progressive CIO national union. Rachleff

²²"The Independent Union of All Workers," 60 (emphasis added).

²³*Ibid.*, 66.

²⁴Edsforth, *Class Conflict*, 152-153.

is more analytical as he tries to face the "complex problem" (or "difficult question," to use Zieger's terminology) that confronted the workers about whom he writes.

Cecilia Bucki says "the Connecticut Federation of Labor did *not* endorse a labor party, contrary to the statement on page 15." Bucki makes this statement in the context of arguing that "[e]ven if a third party won power locally, as the Bridgeport (Connecticut) Socialist Party did in 1933, it could only effect change if it bargained with the holders of political power on the state level"

It may be true that the Connecticut Federation of Labor did not formally endorse the third party movement,²⁵ and if so, I thank Bucki for the correction. But her argument ignores the fact that the movement for a labor party swept through AFL unions all across Connecticut in 1935. As Eric Davin reports, in July 1935 representatives of 350 union locals of the Connecticut Federation of Labor, meeting under the auspices of the Hartford Central Labor Union, unanimously voted for the formation of a Connecticut labor party, anti-capitalist in nature, to be based on trade unions and other mass organizations. A follow-up meeting in New London three weeks later was attended by representatives of 168 AFL union locals with a membership of 48,000 and 21 independent locals with 20,000 members.²⁶ On July 30, the Connecticut Council of the United Textile Workers of America, AFL endorsed a labor party for Connecticut. At a previous meeting delegates had struck from the UTWA bylaws a rule that no political questions could be discussed on the floor of the meeting.²⁷ These events represented potential *statewide* power.

Bucki also takes Davin to task for ignoring his own work on "labor politics in steel towns of the Monongahela Valley where labor activists used the vehicle of the Democratic Party to unseat Republican incumbents who had done steel companies' bidding for many years." She refers to the elections of 1937, when 17 company-run steel towns surrounding Pittsburgh elected administrations composed of local steel workers and their allies. This was a spontaneous, decentralized, successful, rank-and-file political rebellion, a dramatic exception to a national trend of CIO electoral defeats in 1937.²⁸ John L. Lewis, Philip Murray, and other

²⁵Bucki does not provide any authority for her statement. My own statement is based on Federated Press dispatches in the Columbia University Special Collections. Eric Davin has brought to my attention a story in *The New York Times*, Jan. 21, 1936, which states that officials of the Connecticut Federation of Labor claimed to have conducted a referendum showing that a majority of the Federation opposed a labor party, but labor party advocates asserted that only one-sixth of Connecticut's local unions had voted.

²⁶"The Very Last Hurrah?," *We Are All Leaders*, 127.

²⁷Federated Press dispatch, July 30, 1935, Columbia University Special Collections.

²⁸Contrast Eric Leif Davin, "How Democracy and the Union Came to Western Pennsylvania," forthcoming in *Pennsylvania History* (the essay to which Bucki refers), with Lichtenstein, *Walter Reuther*, 91.

top CIO-SWOC leaders knew little about what was going on. The Democratic Party in the steel towns of Western Pennsylvania had no significant leadership, ward heelers, money, or constituency. The only thing it had was ballot status. In the mid-1930s local steelworkers, on their own initiative, flooded into the moribund local Democratic parties and made them over in their own image into *de facto* labor parties.

Why didn't New Bedford and Akron labor party activists enter the Democratic Party from the beginning? Because the Democratic Party in their areas was strong, and hostile. The Democratic governor of Connecticut called out the National Guard to kill striking textile workers in 1934. Leading Lawrence textile union organizer and Labor Party militant Joseph Novo echoed widespread sentiment when he termed Boston's Democratic mayor, James Michael Curley, a "fascist."²⁹ Akron rubber workers viewed Ohio Democratic Governor Davey as hopelessly anti-labor. In Western Pennsylvania, however, the Democratic Party was a hollow shell and had been so since the Civil War. It was no threat to working-class political aspirations. Rather, it was a convenient tool for an alternative, independent labor politics. In their horizontal affiliations and their reliance on the local community, Western Pennsylvania's ostensibly Democratic but *de facto* labor parties resembled the homegrown steelworkers' unions of the early 1930s, which functioned sometimes outside and sometimes inside national labor federations.

Finally, Ronald Edsforth critiques Michael Kozura's use of the oral histories of just a "few" participants with "(self-defined) heroic stands" against corporate efforts to reclaim land seized by bootleg miners. Edsforth also says that the oral history from which the title of Kozura's essay is drawn ("We were defiant. We stood our ground") is "unattributed."

Kozura's essay is based on more than 50 interviews he conducted with bootleg miners. The phrase "We stood our ground" is drawn from John Wetzel's interview with Kozura on August 3, 1990.

Edsforth does not quarrel with Kozura's assertion that a massive expropriation of land from the coal companies occurred. Kozura sets out to determine, "Why, given the massive legal protections afforded private property, did thousands of workers decide to 'expropriate the means of production'? What inspired such extreme objectives? . . . [W]hat explains the widespread support and marked success of their movement?"³⁰ Surely the best way to answer these questions is through an understanding of the worker's perspective. While miners may recast

²⁹"The Very Last Hurrah?", 139.

³⁰"We Stood Our Ground," *We Are All Leaders*, 200.

their efforts in a more heroic light some 60 years after the fact, to a large extent one must trust their recollections of their movement if one is to examine their consciousness. How is one to form a thorough analysis without consulting what workers, both in the 1930s and today, think about their own lives and struggles?

Edsforth minimizes the feats and the pride of the bootleggers by concluding that miners "lost and disappeared." He ignores the lasting effect that bootleggers had on the regional economy. Kozura notes that, in the two southern counties, bootleg coal production "accounted for one in four jobs and provided \$40 million in yearly income to the region, surpassing the jobs and income lost to disinvestment."³¹ This large economic contribution lives on in the infrastructure and family economies of the anthracite coal region today. More significantly, the bootleggers' militant stance in "taking over the means of production" is of particular relevance to today's workers who face corporate disinvestment. The bootleggers' story will only disappear if historians decide to ignore it.

IV

The most serious challenge to the project of a more decentralized and democratic "alternative" unionism comes from scholars who have pointed to the racism of rank-and-file white workers. Edsforth alludes to this historiography before concluding: "I have *struggled to understand* how this volume could have been put together recently without considering questions of race more comprehensively" (emphasis added). Edsforth goes on to say of John Borsos' article on Barberton:

[I]n a critical place early in his piece, while trying to explain how Barberton could have both "resilient" ethnic and African-American communities (240), and also develop a movement that seemed able to unite these communities, Borsos offers only this one unsubstantiated bit of oral history testimony—"Our gang walked to Highland Junior High School, there was a Black boy, a Jewish boy, a couple of Slovaks, and a hillbilly, who all walked together" (241).

Edsforth suggests that other members of the gang might remember their experience differently.

Later on in the same essay, however, Borsos describes Federal Labor Union 20183 at the Pittsburgh Valve and Fitting plant. In contrast to other Barberton FLUs, between one-third and one-half of the members of FLU 20183 were African-American. In May 1936 FLU 20183 struck for recognition. Borsos quotes the remarkable document from which

³¹ *Ibid.*

the title of his piece is drawn, a letter from H. D. Hanna, secretary of the Barberton Central Labor Union, to William Green, president of the AFL:

This Valve strike MUST not be lost. It is the only Mixed local in town. about 50% being collored. and they have so far pulled together like one race. Should this strike be broken, the employer will at once use the one race against the other as he has in the past. It took us two years of constant effort to override race prejudice and get this a 100% organization as it now is and we CANT see it fail. We make you this appeal in the name of every union man and woman in Barberton. "Do all in your power to aid this local 20183 finacialy with a donation and help us to keep the race prejudice licked in Barberton." [Punctuation and spelling as in original]³²

This letter is a fact. Written by one white AFL leader to another, it suggests that some recent "comprehensive" statements about the AFL, the CIO, and the white working class in the United States, may be premature. A good deal of evidence indicates that considerable progress toward racial equality was made by black activists and white radicals working together in *local* settings such as UAW Local 600 and ILWU Local 10.³³

There are other such facts in "*We Are All Leaders*." It is true that Mark Naison's essay on the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union was written 30 years ago and is reprinted unchanged, as one commentator observes, but we are not aware of more recent research that requires revision of Naison's conclusion that the STFU represented "a revival of the old populist dream of a black-white alliance that would convert the southern working class into a powerful force for radical change."³⁴

³²"We Make You this Appeal in the Name of Every Union Man and Woman in Barberton," 262.

³³UAW Local 600 (the Ford River Rouge local) was about 10% black. Judith Stepan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlin, *Talking Union* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 144 (oral history of Dave Moore); Zieger, *CIO*, 83. Yet in the 1940s and 1950s, if white and black delegates from Local 600 went to a hotel or restaurant at which blacks were not served, "that hotel was almost torn apart. . . . White guys was doing it for us." *Talking Union*, 135–36 (oral history of Dave Moore). Local 600 even had beauty contests in which black women were chosen as beauty queens. *Ibid.*, 138. For ILWU Local 10, see David Wellman, *The union makes us strong: Radical unionism on the San Francisco waterfront* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). But racial egalitarianism was *not* characteristic of ILWU locals outside of San Francisco and Hawaii. *Ibid.*, 53 n.11. See also Sylvia Woods' account of how Communist Mamie Harris told white workers in a UAW local in Chicago during World War II that if they didn't want to work with a skilled black worker, they could quit. Sylvia Woods, "You Have to Fight for Freedom," in *Rank and File*, 118. Similarly, Merlin Luce, who worked at U.S. Steel's Ohio Works in Youngstown from 1945 until the 1970s, recalls that Trotskyist grievance committeeman Ted Dostal told white workers if they were unwilling to work with a newly-promoted black, they could pick up their time (Oral history, April 9, 1997).

³⁴"The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the CIO," *We Are All Leaders*, 102.

The most striking paradigm in the book with respect to race relations in the working class is that set forth by Rosemary Feurer in her essay on St. Louis. The Funsten Nut Company, on which her essay focuses,

completely segregated women by race. White women were hired for the main plant, which included a storefront visible from the streets, but the greatest number—perhaps 80 percent—of its work force was African American women.

Black women were paid less and worked longer hours than white women. Alice Love, a white woman whom Feurer interviewed, did not even know that black women worked in the plant until a day when she peeked through the floor boards and discovered that there were black co-workers in the basement below. Feurer suggests that current historiographical stereotypes would lead one to conclude that this was hardly promising terrain for unionism. The national AFL was ineffective and the CIO did not yet exist. Skilled white males, often supposed to have led union organizing in the 1930s, were unavailable. The core group at Funsten were unskilled African American women, "the most marginal and vulnerable workers in the economy."³⁵

A union was nevertheless formed and a successful strike conducted. One key to its success was that whites were not asked to sacrifice so that blacks could have more. In 1933 average earnings at Funsten were \$3–4 a week for blacks, \$4–6 a week for whites. The black women who began the strike demanded a 50 percent increase, and equal wages for black and white workers. Understandably, those who came out on the first day of the strike were for the most part African American. However, on the second day 200 white women from the main Funsten plant joined them. Victory gave a raise to every one but a greater raise to blacks than to whites, so that they would thereafter be equal.³⁶ Most white workers I have known would consider this outcome fair. I think Feurer suggests a promising model for overcoming racism.

A final fact about race presented in "*We Are All Leaders*" arises in conversation between Stan Weir and "Blackie" Soromengo, the ship bosun. "Blackie" shares with Weir and other shipmates the fact that he is from the Cape Verde Islands and is part African. He goes on to say:

Ten years ago when we were building new unions on the waterfront up and down this coast, the regular guys got more open-minded on a lot of things. Like so many others, I didn't grab the opportunity of that time.

³⁵"The Nutpickers' Union," *We Are All Leaders*, 27, 33, 34.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 33–36. Compare the comment of one retired black steelworker in the documentary, "Struggles in Steel: The Fight for Equal Opportunity" (produced by Ray Henderson and Tony Buba, distributed by California Newsreel): "Racism is all economics. If everybody was doing good, you wouldn't have all that."

I suppose many of the men I sailed and walked picket lines with figured I was a Mexican because of my straight hair. I let it slide. My name isn't Soromengo, it's Soromenho—Portuguese, not Spanish.³⁷

Much more work should be done before anyone comes to comprehensive conclusions about race relations among workers in the 1930s. At the end of the Introduction I say, "scholars who wish to explore and test the hypotheses set forth here might take note that several of these essays describe extraordinary instances of black and white workers overcoming their differences in common struggle."³⁸ It is inaccurate to characterize this properly tentative attitude as neglect.

V

John Borsos, now a union organizer, offers the following thoughts about the comments on *"We Are All Leaders"*:

1. Even John Sweeney recognizes that the AFL-CIO has to change the way that it operates. What's happening in Las Vegas and Los Angeles is essentially the AFL-CIO's embrace of a horizontal style of organizing while nationally the AFL-CIO understands that it needs to move away from a "servicing" mode of operation to one that is based on collective, direct action (i.e., an "organizing" model). It's ironic that Sweeney is further to the Left on these issues than these commentators appear to be. Our essays raise some of the things that a revived labor movement should consider: empowering the members, more action, etc. Furthermore, we do consider—albeit in passing—the issue of national coordination.

2. What's wrong with politically motivated scholarship? At least we declare our politics openly. Is the research shoddy? Nobody seems to say so. So what's the problem? An interpretational variance based on politics?

3. I think it is necessary to recognize the differences between the 1930s and contemporary times. I think the crisis in capital in the 1930s provided a greater opportunity for experimentation among workers. In the 1980s and 1990s, capital is bigger and in general better organized. Where organizers in the 1930s had some opportunity to learn as they went along, in today's climate you don't get a second chance. In general within two days of discussion on a shop floor of workers' desire to organize, an employer will have retained a union buster to thwart the organizing drive. Capital, in crisis, was less well-prepared in the 1930s, I believe.

³⁷"Unions with Leaders Who Stay on the Job," *"We Are All Leaders,"* 324.

³⁸Introduction, 18.

4. Our essays should frame a research agenda: What made some communities more horizontally-inclined than others? Was it geography? Was it size? Was it ethnic/racial demographics? Was it the industrial composition? Is it true, as these essays might suggest, that local or even national unions that originated prior to the establishment of the CIO in late 1935–1936 in general exhibited a more democratic, militant unionism than those that were formed after? How do the constitutional, bargaining, and representational infrastructures of the UAW, URW, USWA, UE and PWOC (as just five examples) compare and how can these commonalities and differences be explained? My hunch is that in these sectors, each of which engaged in pattern bargaining, there were significant differences. So historians should address the challenges they raise.

VI

My own conclusions are as follows.

When all is said and done, the difference between the 10 contributors to *We Are All Leaders* and the four commentators thereon is not a matter of facts, or even of scholarly interpretation. It has to do with values.

The phrase "we are all leaders" expresses in working-class vernacular a value that some scholars in the Marxist tradition, awkwardly translating the German *Selbsttätigkeit* and the Russian *samodeyatelnost*, have called "self-activity."³⁹

A second synonym is more useful for present purposes. The idea that "we are all leaders" is one that civil rights activists and students in the 1960s also affirmed, using the term "participatory democracy."

What Charles Payne calls "the organizing tradition" in the civil rights movement flowed from the work of older leaders such as Myles Horton, Ella Baker, and Septima Clark. These organic intellectuals and grass-roots leaders were "insistent on the right of people to have a voice in the decisions affecting their lives, confident in the potential of ordinary men and women to develop the capacity to do that effectively, skeptical of top-down organizations, the people who led them, and the egotism that leadership frequently engendered." They shared "a faith that ordinary people who learn to believe in themselves are capable of extraordinary acts, or better, of acts that seem extraordinary to us precisely because we have such an impoverished sense of the capabilities of ordinary people." They were committed "to participatory political forms

³⁹I have explored the history of "self-activity" in an essay delivered in abbreviated form at the North American Labor History Conference in 1995, and published under the title "The Webbs, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg" in Staughton Lynd, *Living Inside Our Hope: A Steadfast Radical's Thoughts on Rebuilding the Movement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

because people develop by participating, not by being lectured to or told what to do."⁴⁰

"Participatory democracy" was a starting point for many labor historians, too. In the Preface to *Labor's War at Home*, Nelson Lichtenstein gives an excellent sketch of the frame of mind in which he and a number of others came to labor history. In the early 1970s, he writes,

many of us who were active in the student movement concluded that radical social and political change could come only if it were based, at least in part, on a working-class mobilization equal to or greater than that of the 1930s. However, when we looked to those who actually labored in American factories and offices, we found more inertia than activism, and the trade unions seemed sclerotic and increasingly impotent.⁴¹

These words exactly describe my own trajectory. When my wife Alice and I published *Rank and File* in the early 1970s, our Introduction catalogued the same indicia of labor movement decline but also pointed to two of the same signs of hope that Nelson mentioned in his Preface 10 years later: Miners for Democracy and shop-floor activity at Lordstown. Similarly Ronald Edsforth says about himself that he is a "frustrated veteran of the student New Left" for whom "labor history . . . became an important academic refuge."⁴²

Thus the critical question that divides contributors and commentators may not be whether we believe in participatory democracy. I think most of the commentators probably do (see Edsforth's statement quoted above: "I am emotionally stirred by the idea that we all can be leaders"). The question is whether one feels obliged to set that value aside, to give it up, when dealing with the labor movement either as an activist or as a scholar.

The question could also be asked this way: The commentators say that when "*We Are All Leaders*" contrasts bureaucracy and self-organization, we are burdened by a false dichotomy (Bucki) or shackled to outdated polarities (Horowitz). But is it true that *workers* are no longer interested in the choice between bureaucracy and self-government, or is it only a group of labor historians who have lost interest? I have represented rank-and-file workers as a lawyer for 20 years. Together

⁴⁰Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 3, 4, 101, 121. See also Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

⁴¹Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home*, ix.

⁴²Ronald Edsforth, "Affluence, Anti-Communism, and the Transformation of Industrial Unionism Among Automobile Workers, 1933-1973," in Ronald Edsforth and Larry Bennett, eds., *Popular Culture and Political Change in Modern America* (Albany: State University of New York, 1991), 103.

with my wife, I am presently Local Education Coordinator of a Teamster local with 3500 members. I find an extraordinary parallelism between the issues that faced workers in the early 1930s, and the issues they face today. When John L. Lewis put into effect a contract that had been rejected by the UMW members who voted on it (see above), he did what AFL-CIO leaders did in seeking to end recent strikes at Hormel meatpacking, Caterpillar, and the Detroit newspapers. When Lewis, Martin, and Brophy deliberately destroyed the UAW local in Flint that had emerged from the historic sit-down there (see above), they acted as did John Sweeney who—just before taking office as AFL-CIO president—put into trusteeship the “justice for janitors” local in Los Angeles, SEIU Local 399. Local 399 was just such a multi-craft (and multi-racial) alternative local union as our book describes.⁴³

I believe that Lewis wanted, and Sweeney wants, organization but *not* democracy. Workers, in my experience, want both. In his concluding essay, Stan Weir challenges workers and historians alike to imagine how in a time when corporations have become multinational, and horizontal links must be built between workers who live thousands of miles from each other and speak different languages, the values associated with unions whose leaders stay on the job can be preserved.

⁴³The destruction of democracy in SEIU Local 399 is described by participants in Iris Bennett, “Los Angeles workers fight for union democracy,” *The Labor Page*, Dec. 1995, and Andrea Carney, “What is happening in Local 399, SEIU?” *Impact*, Sept. 1996. As of 1995 Local 399 was made up of approximately 27,000 members broken down, roughly, as follows: 14,000 health care workers, 8000 janitors, and 5000 workers in allied industries. 48 per cent of the membership was Latino, followed by African Americans (20%), Caucasians (20%), and Asians and Asian Pacific Americans (10%). *Ibid.* In an article in *Impact* (July 1997), Carney states that through the years Local 399 included “gardeners and elevator operators as well as workers in markets, apartments, hotels, hospitals, convalescent homes, warehouses, theaters, racetracks, and theme parks.”