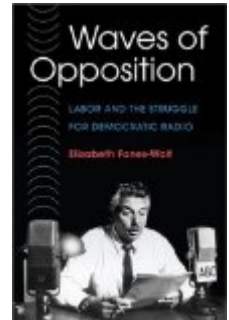


Elizabeth Fones-Wolf. *Waves of Opposition: Labor and the Struggle for Democratic Radio.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. viii + 307 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-07364-9.



Reviewed by Joseph A. Rodriguez

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Elizabeth Fones-Wolf has written an intriguing volume on the history of the U.S. labor movement's radio broadcasting efforts. The book traces the battle between labor and business leaders to exploit radio. Always better funded and more politically connected, U.S. business leaders used radio to promote unrestricted free enterprise and to denounce unions, particularly during strikes. Labor responded to these attacks by fighting for greater access to radio, creating its own radio stations (both AM and FM) and protesting unfair business commentary and restrictions on labor broadcasts. Yet by the 1960s, labor's radio presence was slight. The author concludes that labor's ultimate failure resulted from a combination of factors: internal debate about the effectiveness of radio; lack of resources; censorship and repression by the commercial radio industry; the tendency of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to side with business; and the growth of television.

Fones-Wolf mined numerous archival collections including a variety of union collections, records from the American Civil Liberties Union,

broadcasting archives, and journals like *Variety* and *Billboard*. She begins in the 1920s by describing the power of radio and the recognition on the part of labor unions of the medium's potential to promote labor's interests and bypass other mass media (like the mainstream press) considered antiunion. Like the working-class-oriented films analyzed by historians Steven J. Ross in *Working Class-Hollywood* (1998) and John Bodnar in *Blue-Collar Hollywood* (2003), radio seemed to offer the chance to promote unionism.

Fones-Wolf traces that development in detail. In the 1920s, due to the union's craft orientation, William Green, leader of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), failed to use radio to benefit labor. Other labor activists, though, used radio to challenge antiunionism among U.S. corporations. Such efforts led in 1926 to the Chicago Federation of Labor's founding of WCFL, which operated until the mid-1970s as a listener-supported, nonprofit station. WCFL promoted labor organizations, supported workers during strikers, and attacked scabs. Its aggressive pro-labor programming drew

the ire of business owners who sought to limit labor's use of radio.

To counter growing criticism of business, in the 1930s companies like DuPont used the radio to denounce the New Deal and promote an unregulated free enterprise system. Beginning in 1935, DuPont, sponsored "Cavalcade of America," an historical drama that celebrated corporate values. Similarly, Ford sponsored a music series with intermission talks that promoted business, criticized the New Deal and highlighted Ford's positive employee relations. Under a contract paid for by the radio producer Philco, commentator Boake Carter recited the news and denounced labor and the New Deal in a daily broadcast. But while business invested millions in self-promotion over the radio and reached more Americans than pro-labor programming did, Fones-Wolf suggests the impact was unclear.

What was clear, Fones-Wolf notes, is that business programming provoked labor to make a concerted effort to gain access to radio. To curb anti-labor propaganda, labor first appealed to the FCC. Led by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), labor also made a much more aggressive effort to use radio to counter business claims and to promote unions. Responding to Carter, labor organized a boycott of Philco and the company dropped the commentator in 1937. Yet labor still had problems obtaining airtime. CBS and NBC refused to sell air time to unions, and others stations censored labor programs for promotion of "controversial issues" that might offend advertisers. And while the FCC mandated public programming, local network affiliates gave some airtime to unions but often edited commentaries to avoid controversies.

In the 1930s unions across the country applied for radio licenses, including the powerful International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. Morris S. Novik, chief media advisor for the CIO, also played a major role in promoting labor's use of radio. The United Auto Workers (UAW) formed its

own radio department and produced programming that featured talks promoting organizing, supporting strikers, and denouncing unfair employee practices. Other programming included labor news, humor, and amateur hours. CIO leaders saw radio as a way to recruit workers who felt intimidated speaking to union representatives at the work place, and union programs helped with exchange of news and information during strikes. In one case, workers in their houses listened to union leaders reporting on the possible arrival of scabs and on whether workers should rush to the picket line. Labor also used radio to encourage women and children to support the union.

Labor's expanded use of radio in the 1930s led to a renewed effort on the part of business in the 1940s. Businesses mounted a campaign to get labor off the air, or severely restrict what it could say. Arguing that labor programming was propaganda, business sought government intervention to limit labor's access to radio. In response to such efforts--and in the hopes it could derail potential government regulation--the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) adopted a voluntary code of ethics that severely restricted the discussion of controversial issues in radio broadcasts.

Some commercial stations interpreted that code as prohibiting any labor broadcasters from discussing strikes, criticizing employers, or organizing workers. Still other stations denied unions access but allowed business leaders to criticize unions, particularly during strikes. Unions, in turn, fought back to gain more access--calling, writing, petitioning stations and the FCC, complaining about denial of airtime and censorship. In other words, stations ignored the code when pro-business commentators bashed unions, but enforced it against unions seeking access to the radio.

World War II saw a concerted effort by unions to undermine the NAB code and put labor in a strong position to demand greater access to radio. For example, conservative radio commen-

tators like NBC's H. V. Kaltenborn railed against Franklin Delano Roosevelt's war policies and criticized the labor movement in a program broadcast five times a week during evening prime time. Labor protested Kaltenborn's show and boycotted his sponsor, Pure Oil.

Labor did find some outlets that ignored the code and provided airtime on independent stations, and it received some free airtime as a "public service" from the networks during the war. NBC, for example, allowed the AFL and CIO to produce "Labor for Victory," a fifteen-minute weekly show beginning in 1942. AFL shows were straightforward pronouncements on labor's efforts to win the war. CIO got more creative with dramas including one about a black worker facing discrimination in a nonunion war plant. However, NBC censored the CIO's shows, finally killing the series in 1944. (The NAB abolished the code in 1945.)

Ultimately, in the 1940s, labor gained the right to buy air time and did so to combat anti-labor legislation like Taft-Hartley as well as respond to anti-labor attacks by business interests. The CIO organized educational classes to get locals up to speed on using radio effectively for organizing and protesting business attacks. Most active was the UAW, which provided training for locals and scripts to help locals put on their own broadcasts. These efforts bore fruit: in the early 1950s, Michigan had sixteen weekly local CIO radio programs. Most involved talks by labor leaders, but some included entertainment (music, drama, comedy) that served union interests and others included the voices of workers. Sponsorship of sports added to public attraction, including sponsoring high school and college basketball and football games. The Teamsters sponsored local radio broadcast of Notre Dame football in Chicago and Philadelphia. Morris Novik was instrumental in pushing unions aggressively into FM radio. Union stations offered diverse programming in Yiddish, Polish, Italian, Greek, and Ukrainian. Unions

broadcast discussions on race issues and hired black disk jockeys.

In the 1950s, NBC and CBS gave labor air time, but controlled the formats of the public service programming while ABC gave labor total freedom. Frank Edwards--a liberal commentator who served as the AFL's national commentator from 1950-54--was so hard hitting and critical of business and the Republicans that the AFL fired him. Guy Nunn's "Eye Opener" morning show, which began in 1954, was popular in Detroit providing labor news, commentary, sports, jokes, comedy, and consumer tips. Business tried to stifle labor's radio by appealing to the FCC, charging that labor played politics over the radio. A grand jury indicated the UAW for using radio politically during the 1954 campaign under Taft-Hartley's Federal Corrupt Practices, but the jury found the UAW not guilty.

In 1968, the UAW ended "Eye Opener" and shut down its radio and television department. The author sees this as resulting from the UAW's growing conservatism and narrow political focus, but Nunn's support for civil rights also created controversy within the UAW. By the 1970s labor was rarely heard on the radio. Today, however, there has been a slight resurgence. In Wisconsin, for example, the teachers and construction unions advertise on commercial radio, possibly stimulated by antiunion advertisements that are also heard. Fones-Wolf notes there are more than sixty labor programs on radio and television throughout the United States. But labor, she concludes, needs a renewed effort to oppose corporate control of the media.

This book is thoroughly researched, gracefully written, and uncovers a little-known aspect of labor history. However, this reviewer had some slight reservations. Fones-Wolf persistently draws sharp distinctions between noble labor broadcasts and evil business interests, and only slightly touches on the internal divisions of either group. The book's organizing principle, which pits labor

against business in a battle for access to radio, leaves out other developments such as the changing economic landscape within which the radio industry as a whole operated; changing listener preferences and consumerism; and the rise of the transistor and car radio.

Finally, there is some question regarding the impact of radio on unions. Fones-Wolf implies that while limited, labor's successes in accessing radio had some positive effect on the labor movement, but the evidence is scant. Indeed, the book is as much about business's successful antilabor programming as it is about labor's response. Nevertheless, the book will interest labor and media historians, and American historians more generally.

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