

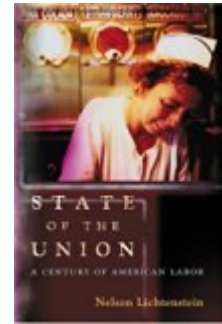
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nelson Lichtenstein. *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. xi + 336 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-05768-2.

Reviewed by Richard P. Mulcahy (Division of Social Science, University of Pittsburgh at Titusville)

Published on H-Pol (October, 2002)



American Labor: Where Did We Go Wrong?

American Labor: Where Did We Go Wrong?

During the debate in 1993 over federal legislation outlawing the use of so-called permanent replacement workers during strikes, conservatives spoke against the measure by arguing for the need to preserve a “delicate balance” that supposedly existed between labor and management. The image conjured up was one where employers were at big labor’s mercy and thereby needed something to combat union power. The irony is that many people believed this assertion, which was grounded more in fantasy than in fact.

The reality was, and continues to be, that big labor is not all that big. Since the start of the 1980s, the position of organized labor in the U.S. economy has shrunk from representing 28 percent of the non-farm work-force to approximately 16 percent or less. Moreover, the machinery created during the New Deal to protect a worker’s right to organize, the Wagner Labor Relations Act, is now antiquated and nearly useless. Union supporters are regularly fired by their employers in flagrant violation of the law. Meanwhile, these same employers jokingly characterize any back-pay awards made to reinstated labor activists as a “hunting license” fee.[1] In the meantime, unions have been demonized to the general public as unnecessary, job-destroying and generally counter-productive.

Considering the position that the labor movement once commanded in the U.S. economy, the question must be asked, how did this happen? Certainly there are an-

swers that leap out: the effects of deindustrialization, the open hostility of the Reagan and first Bush administrations to unions, and the indifference of the Clinton presidency. These points, however, are only the symptoms of a much larger and more basic problem. In his excellent new study, *State of the Union*, Professor Nelson Lichtenstein attempts to identify that problem and offer some solutions.

Lichtenstein’s argument is varied and subtle. He begins the book with what must be considered the salad days of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), when it successfully organized anti-union stalwarts such as General Motors and United States Steel. From Lichtenstein’s perspective, what gave the CIO its strength was not simply the quality of its organizers and leaders, but its wider vision of itself as a force for social democratic change. Although bread and butter concerns were part of the CIO’s program, these did not hold center stage. The most important thing was the achievement of an industrial democracy in which labor had a say not only in salaries and work-rules, but in such matters as over-all management and investment decisions.

Unfortunately, this vision of social democracy was traded for a regime centered upon non-ideological collective bargaining. A number of factors contributed to this situation. First, under regulations established by the newly formed National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), whose purpose was to ensure fair labor practices, organized labor had to give up the use of direct action tactics,

such as the sit-down strike, in order to enjoy the protection the NLRB afforded. Second, the strike-wave seen immediately after the close of World War II failed to force large corporations into granting organized labor a place at board room tables. Third, a major organizing drive for the South, known as Operation Dixie, failed to meet its goals, leaving the labor movement concentrated primarily in the Northeast and the Midwest. Finally, there were the effects of the Taft-Hartley Act.

Under Taft-Hartley, the labor movement was dealt several blows that had long-range consequences. First, the new law hardened the lines between management and labor by disallowing union membership for such supervisory personnel as foremen and straw-bosses. Prior to this, several major unions, including the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) had recruited such people as part of organizing drives. Second, Taft-Hartley outlawed secondary boycotts. These had been used with great effect in the past by enabling workers in disputes to exert greater pressure on their employers. Third and worst of all, labor leaders had to sign affidavits that they were not Communists. This requirement would eventually force the CIO to expel its left-wing affiliates, most notably the United Electrical Workers.

With Taft-Hartley and the other factors listed above, America's labor movement was defanged and ceased to represent anything remotely resembling an oppositional culture or politics. Worse, the labor movement was "ghettoized," separating it from the rest of the nation not only geographically, but socially, economically, and politically. This trend was further reinforced in 1955 when the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and CIO merged. Although more visionary labor leaders such as Walter Reuther held senior positions in the newly merged federation, its presidency was occupied by George Meany. A member of the plumber's union, Meany reflected the conservatism of the craft union which produced him. During his leadership, the AFL-CIO would remain well within the confines of the collective bargaining regime, with the federation and most of its affiliates simply acting as glorified business managers for their memberships.

This situation is the pivot upon which Lichtenstein's argument turns. Essentially, while the labor movement sought to stand still, the rest of American society continued to evolve. Because of this, the labor movement failed to participate in any of the changes that took place during the 1960s and 1970s, most notably what Lichtenstein refers to as the "rights revolution." Rather than being at the forefront seeking constructive change for America's

dispossessed (racial minorities, women and the poor), organized labor barely took notice of what was happening, other than to issue occasional ritualized statements of support. To the young college students involved in the rights struggle, including future president Bill Clinton, this lack of engagement indicated that American unions were part of the conservative establishment.

The denouement came when the collective bargaining regime collapsed in the late 1970s. Isolated from any constituencies broader than its own membership, organized labor had no allies to protect it from Ronald Reagan and the neoconservatives. The exception which proved the rule, to use Lichtenstein's phrase, were various white-collar unions representing groups such as teachers and municipal employees. Unlike the rest of the labor movement, these organizations took part in the rights revolution in order to secure better conditions for their members. Due to this association, these unions were seen as protecting people's rights as citizens, and not just as workers. The result has been that these unions have grown in membership during the last twenty years, while the rest of organized labor has been in eclipse.

Lichtenstein's arguments are compelling and well documented, and reflect a continuation of a basic theme found in his earlier writings.[2] That theme is the economic and political ghettoization mentioned above, combined with labor's loss of its radical edge, proved to be a recipe for long-term decline and institutional disaster.

Lichtenstein is at his best when making this argument. He skillfully leads the reader through a myriad of facts and venues, doing it with great finesse and humor. The only matter which some readers may question is his claim that a supposed labor-management accord or "social contract" concluded after the end of World War II never really existed. This is understandable since such thinking contributed to the labor movement putting aside its oppositional traditions. Going further, there is no question but that while certain corporate leaders paid lip-service to this idea, many did not take it seriously.

Nevertheless, the record does indicate that such understandings were reached and kept in certain industries, most notably coal. In 1950, John L. Lewis concluded just such an understanding with the nation's leading mid-western and northern coal operators. In return for long-term recognition of Lewis's union, the UMWA, and control of its Welfare and Retirement Fund, Lewis acceded to large-scale mechanization of the coal industry. Although this agreement proved detrimental to the UMWA in the long run by putting it in a self-contradictory po-

sition, there is no question but that the coal industry's leadership made the agreement with Lewis in good faith.

This assertion, however, does not mitigate Lichtenstein's argument. In fact, it enhances it. The UMWA's understanding with the major coal operators was a prime example of the collective bargaining regime in action, and was hailed as marking the end of combativeness in industrial relations. Good faith on both sides notwithstanding, the UMWA declined and would later be victimized after John L. Lewis passed from the scene. This was done by a new generation of corporate leaders who refused to uphold an agreement made by their predecessors that they considered outdated. The lesson to be drawn is clear: such corporatist agreements do not work and are debilitating to labor organizations over the long term.

In concluding his book, Lichtenstein argues that it is not too late for organized labor to turn the situation around. The method he proposes is for the labor movement to embrace the rights revolution, and to put itself at the forefront of this movement. In making this argument, Lichtenstein cites his own experience, and that of several different organizations, particularly those in California seeking to protect the interests of Latino immigrants.

This argument makes sense on its face and is hard to dispute when the record is examined. Basically, Lichtenstein offers something that is concrete and useable, rather than the wishful thinking and pie-in-the-sky hopes that other authors have indulged. All in all, this is an important and vital book for anyone interested either in labor history, or the current state of labor relations in the United States. Fascinating to read and wide in scope, it is highly recommended for every reading list, especially those used in graduate programs.

Notes

[1]. See Stephen H. Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinity in the Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p. 247.

[2]. Including *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), and his essay "From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclipse of Social Democracy in the Post War Era," in Steven Fraser and Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

Citation: Richard P. Mulcahy. Review of Lichtenstein, Nelson, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. October, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6860>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.