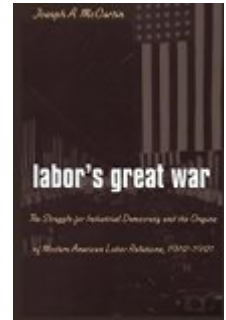


Joseph A. McCartin. *Labor's Great War: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy and the Origins of Modern American Labor Relations, 1912-1921.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xiv + 303 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2372-9.



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>From its enshrinement as a core principle of American society, *democracy* has taken on endless meanings in the service of countless causes--whether to liberate or oppress, enfranchise or exclude, revolutionize or entrench. At certain moments, debate over the scope and thrust of democracy has galvanized the nation. Ours is clearly no such moment--quite the contrary, as Clintonian centrism thrives at home and wins imitators abroad, as underdeveloped countries face the hegemonic paradigm of capitalism, and as the breezy equation of "democracy" with "free markets" smothers progressive alternatives. Rather than revitalize public discourse on democracy, the passing of the Cold War has seen it languish.

What a contrast from the second decade of the twentieth century, when a new idea--"industrial democracy"--captured popular imagination. Little heard outside Fabian and Social Gospel circles before 1912, the concept was soon at the hub of debate over the interrelations of capital, labor, and an ascendant federal state. By the aftermath of World War I, something called "industrial democracy" had found an improbable

mix of followers, from Woodrow Wilson to Samuel Gompers, Jane Addams to Frank Walsh, Louis Brandeis to Morris Cooke, John Fitzpatrick to John D. Rockefeller, Walter Lippmann to William Howard Taft--not to mention thousands of labor activists from a diversity of regions, occupations, and backgrounds. What was industrial democracy? "[O]n that troublesome question," Joseph A. McCartin asserts, "much turned, including the fate of progressivism and the course of twentieth-century labor relations" (p. 2). On this contention, *Labor's Great War* itself turns. With subtlety and insight, McCartin traces how the elastic notion of industrial democracy came to define, and quicken, the seismic labor conflicts of the World War I era.

Of course, the swirl of unrest, repression, reform, and reaction that prompted this "troublesome question" long pre-dated the term industrial democracy. So too did the basic issues that kept the age-old "Labor Question" churning through the 1910s: What is the value--material and moral--of labor? What voice should workers have in setting its terms? How might the workplace foster

expressions of citizenship? How (if at all) should gender, race, ethnicity, or skill affect the resolution of these issues? Yet if industrial democracy offered a new vocabulary for old questions, its arrival also signaled key shifts in the politics of labor. The advent of scientific management extended the issue of workplace governance into a new era of mass production. The changing demography of industrial work challenged the sway of craft union conservatism within the House of Labor. Progressive expansion of state power further rejuvenated the labor question. The so-called Great War not only accelerated these trends, but injected transformative dynamics of its own. In exploring how these developments "allowed and encouraged Americans to recast the labor question around the demand for industrial democracy" (p. 4), McCartin offers our richest study yet of American labor and politics in the epoch of World War I.

It was the prewar coalition of Wilsonian Democrats, trade unionists, and left-wing progressives that brought industrial democracy into political currency. Central to McCartin's treatment of this tenuous alliance is Frank Walsh, business lawyer-turned-labor advocate whose crusading stewardship of Wilson's Commission on Industrial Relations (1913-15) won him national prominence. At once scrappy reformer and savvy politico, Walsh championed a conception of industrial democracy anchored in the right of all workers to organize, and to enjoy a say over the conditions of their labor. If his place in Wilson's orbit unsettled the more moderate progressives (and scandalized stand-pat conservatives), Walsh counted allies and associates in many corners—from Washington big-wigs to working-class radicals, corporate managers to feminist reformers, civil rights activists to Greenwich Village socialists. Walsh's ability to straddle these worlds suggests a flair for projecting "a public persona as a militant maverick ... calculated to give him maximum leverage in the world of pragmatic politics" (p. 24). Yet the broad appeal of this "part outlaw, part actor" also con-

veys, as McCartin puts it elsewhere, "just how fertile and fluid was the progressive moment before the Great War" (p. 8). The success of Wilson's left-leaning reelection campaign of 1916 confirmed for many the hope (or fear) that an era of industrial democracy was on the horizon.

Momentous in their own right, these developments were but a prelude to the upheaval brought on by war. The overall story is well-known, and McCartin reviews it briskly: the frantic quest for labor, and the dizzying spiral of wage hikes and inflation; the entry of women, blacks, and recent immigrants into skilled and semi-skilled trades, and the resistance their progress occasioned; the surge of labor militancy, organized and informal, and employer measures to crush it; and through it all, the injunctions to unity and sacrifice in the cause of world democracy. Out of this cauldron arose competing notions of industrial democracy. For reform-minded employers and efficiency engineers, it meant company-initiated forms of worker representation (or, "company unionism"); for American Federation of Labor (AFL) leaders, it meant craft-based collective bargaining; for radicals, it meant industrial unionism, workers' control at the shop floor, and, in the end, a fundamental reordering of wealth and power in society. How these visions each in turn would fare was anything but clear in the tumultuous days of 1917. That would be thrashed out on new terrain: an array of federal agencies slapped together to stabilize labor relations. Complex, impassioned, and unpredictable, these wartime battles make up the heart of *Labor's Great War*.

If federal boards were called upon to mediate these divergent programs, they were hardly themselves neutral ground. Indeed, the forging of these bodies—their missions, their structures, their personnel and leadership—is a major part of the narrative. As initial measures to check labor strife floundered, debate persisted over how Washington might best intervene. Eventually Wilson turned to bolder innovation. By early 1918, feder-

al "adjustment bodies"--officered by representatives of labor, business, and the "public"--had-cropped up to monitor labor relations in one industry after another. Most visible was the National War Labor Board (NWLB), co-chaired with unlikely collegiality by Frank Walsh and William Howard Taft, and staffed by a zealous corps of pro-labor investigators. Federal mandates included the unimpeded flow of production, the rationalizing of job structures, a "living wage," and the right to organize (although unaccompanied by the right to the closed shop). Most dramatic was the proliferation of local "shop committees." Elected by employees at thousands of workplaces across the country, these bodies soon showed every sign of fanning the militancy they were meant to contain. No wartime phenomenon did as much as the shop committees to broaden the social composition and democratic vision of American unionism.

Through deft individual portraits and evocative case studies, McCartin conveys what heady times these were for labor activists. Rhetorical juxtapositions of "democracy" and "autocracy" were readily stretched from the battlegrounds "over there" to the mine and mills over here. Four-minute reminders that the workplace was an extension of the trenches lent work an added aura of citizenship. In such a climate, even strikes could credibly be cast as patriotic acts. (Of course, such readings were far from universal.) Still more remarkable was the extent to which federal boards were prepared to take on employer resistance--especially in cases where ferment stoked their concerns about output as well as justice. The NWLB's ruling on behalf of militant metal trades unionists at General Electric's Schenectady works, and its explosive repercussions, are particularly illuminating.

Even at their crest, these tides of industrial democracy rose only so high, and the undertows were always in view. That wartime propaganda could be invoked on behalf of unionism did not shield labor activists from savage repression. If

federal agencies might take the side of organized labor against hostile employers, they did little to protect anti-war dissent. Their expressed principles, moreover, were unevenly applied. The adjustment boards were meant above all to stabilize, not reform, labor relations. And where they did weigh in, the cause of workplace democracy did not always come out ahead. In some cases, such as the steel mills of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and the textile mills of New England, the NWLB sustained not the agenda of industrial unionism, but rather the narrower mission of craft unionism or the glossier promise of company unionism. Deference to "local custom" could further dilute government action, as when the NWLB refused (despite the urging of Walsh and others) to repeal Jim Crow in southern industry. In the end, McCartin asserts, "federal intervention did not occur broadly, deeply, or consistently enough to enable industrial unionists to defeat open-shop employers at their strongest points or to accelerate magically the 'death throes' of craft unionism" (p. 148).

Still, in the afterglow of Armistice, radical advocates of industrial democracy looked towards postwar "reconstruction" with anticipation, as unionism surged and talk abounded of nationalization and permanent labor boards, "Labor's Fourteen Points" and "One Big Union." Of course, their dreams would soon meet a succession of setbacks: the fading ardor and gradual dismantling of the adjustment boards, the antistatist tide of the 1918 elections, the mounting assault on unions and the left, and the collapse of wartime prosperity. By the early 1920s, the only industrial democracy left standing was its palest variant--what might be called the "shadow" industrial democracy of company unionism. Federal disengagement from labor relations allowed employers not only to eradicate organized labor but, as McCartin puts it, to "privatize the debate over industrial democracy" (p. 10). Still, he adds, labor's defeat was not unqualified. The employee representation plans now in vogue could prove less pliable than their authors had imagined. And the very

impulse of welfare capitalists "to make industrial democracy safe for America" implied an admission "that workers had a right to a voice on the job" (p. 218). But however far it may have limped into the privatized atmosphere of the 1920s, the story of industrial democracy really belongs to the watershed era of World War I. Its failure to emerge from those years intact (at least in a form Walsh and company would have recognized) is part of what gives the story its wistful power.

The meteoric passage of industrial democracy has long awaited its historian, and it is good to see the job tackled by one so finely attuned to its drama and fluidity. McCartin's wide-angle focus and extensive research [1] enable him to reassemble the networks of actors that alternately coalesced, clashed, fragmented, and realigned over the course of "labor's great war." In relating these battles, he has a keen eye for their ambiguous dynamics and often paradoxical outcomes. Thus, government intervention could boost the stature of AFL bureaucrats even as it strengthened labor radicals. Federal measures to improve the terms of labor could wind up fueling the very unrest they sought to calm. This unintended effect could place even left-leaning union leaders into uneasily conservative roles; witness the tortured efforts of William Johnston, socialist president of the International Association of Machinists and NWLB member, to quell rank-and-file militancy at hot-spots like Schenectady and Bridgeport.

Rhetorical icons such as "freedom," "equality," and "democracy" are perpetually in flux. The sleepy clichés of one era might reemerge in the next as vibrant questions, crystallizing popular debate, inspiring social movements, and expanding the range of the possible. Industrial democracy was clearly one such phenomenon, and this study restores its relevance to a series of landmark struggles over work, power, citizenship, and material conditions. How widely it permeated the thinking and guided the actions of workers is, of course, harder to gauge. Indeed, the very quality

that made "democracy" such a promising vehicle for the cause of labor—its status as an unassailable, if open-ended ideal—cannot help but blur precisely what industrial democracy meant, and how much it meant, to workers at the grassroots. McCartin readily grants the elusiveness of rank-and-file consciousness, and it does not lessen his contribution. Panoramic, nuanced, alive with irony and contradiction, *Labor's Great War* suggests a scholar who has declined to treat either the state or discourse as autonomous, to choose between top-down or bottom-up approaches, or to let political dogma frame his conclusions.

McCartin concludes on a provocative note. If America's wartime flirtation with industrial democracy took shape through a hardy dialectic of reform and reaction, so too did its long-term legacy. Not even the postwar devastation of labor and the left could extinguish that legacy, for "[t]he great labor struggles that had unfolded since 1912 had irrevocably placed [the question, 'what is industrial democracy?'] at the center of America's debate regarding the labor problem" (p. 220). Ultimately, the case for this proposition comes down to criteria at hand. To be sure, no defeat is truly absolute, and no cause, however whipped or exhausted, vanishes without a trace. But, as with the rout of southern Reconstruction, the defeat of another kind of radical reconstruction in the years after Armistice was monumental. How irrevocably and centrally industrial democracy had been woven into national debate depends upon which strands of that elaborate ideal one has in mind. Insofar as it entailed industrial unionism, the right to organize, collective bargaining, a living wage, and some measure of state action to advance these aims, industrial democracy has largely come to pass, or at least stayed within mainstream discussion. Yet other ingredients of industrial democracy—nationalization of industry or workers' control of production, not to mention radical alternatives to capitalism—have never recovered their World War I-era credibility. At any rate, if left progressives and labor radicals could

be excused for believing in 1918 that an Age of Industrial Democracy was within reach, they could also be excused by 1921 for having come to see that luminous prospect as all-too-revocable.

The very transiency of industrial democracy makes its story that much more compelling. If public debate over democracy lies at a low ebb today, it will doubtless revive from time to time over the coming century, under conditions we can scarcely foresee. Yet one way or another, such debate is bound to echo, and perhaps renew, the history that McCartin reconstructs so ably in *Labor's Great War*.

Note

[1]. This includes the published and archival records of corporations, unions, the federal government, political groups, the press and a galaxy of individual actors.

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