

Radicalism at the Present Moment: A Report on the U.S. Left

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NOTHING, IT would seem, could be more decisive and, according to commentators both liberal and conservative, final within recent human experience than the Second World War (including the Holocaust), which after all turned back the fascist threat. Even the potential catastrophe of the arms race, with the spread of lethal weapons into more and more hands has, like the ongoing ecological crisis, been rapidly “naturalized” as a cost of progress and, in any case, an inevitability. Continuing famines, regionalized armed conflicts, global warming, nuclear attacks, all these can indeed be described as requirements for a strong international order, dictated just as inevitably from Washington. What cannot be accepted is some endpoint to capital’s expansion, or the renewed threat from egalitarians of any variety to reapportion wealth from the rich to the poor in a concerted, structural fashion. As in the 1870–90s with the railroad boom, or again during the 1910–20s and 1940–70s with a combination of technological advances and military Keynesianism, the link of science to profits apparently validates the prosperous classes’ belief in meritocracy to the end of time.

Hence Social Darwinism, which once condemned the immigrant Irish, Chinese, Jews, Slavs, and Italians among others to the lower depths, has now refocused on the African Americans, Hispanic immigrants, single mothers, and others who cannot possibly be entitled, as the ideology asserts, to a significant share. Even family fortunes, once considered (at least by socialists and a large group of liberals) the consequence of labor exploitation and assorted unearned wealth, are now treated as philanthropic foundations in the making, socially sustained, as they were economically created, by inge-

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nity and the courageous use of "risk capital." And socialism? As the future neoconservatives around *Commentary* magazine circles frequently observed during the 1950s, post-New Deal America already had just as much "socialism" as it would ever need. Any more would be a very, very bad thing. Less government assistance to the working class and the indigent (a reduction process destined to be known as "economic reform") would be much better. So it has come to pass.

And yet, the very excesses of the new *fin de siècle* work strangely to reproduce symptoms of capital's opposite and to revive class issues deemed vanished if not entirely forgotten. At the moment socialist (often formerly Communist) and labor parties, swept into office in other parts of the world, predictably submit to international demands and then face the outrage of constituencies feeling wronged. Other erstwhile Communists (as in the former Soviet Union) find themselves practically the last loyal, parliamentary opposition available to international agencies' demands. The old order has almost literally willed itself to die, but the new order is experiencing an uncertain birth, at best.

At home, some interesting signs can be found in the least likely place: the American labor movement. The tottering of business unionism's hierarchy in the October 1995 AFL-CIO convention, rivals in labor history only the bureaucratic consolidation of industrial unionism during the 1940s and the triumph of American Federation of Labor founder Samuel Gompers over his socialist opponents in 1895. Indeed, 1995 might read, in some measure, as these historic events turned inside out. The AFL-CIO's most vituperative Vietnam hawk and the very symbol (since the 1968 New York teacher's strike) of racial division within labor, American Federation of Teachers' president Albert Shanker, was said to have almost literally gagged while turning the gavel at the podium of the convention over to winner and reform champion John Sweeney. Shanker's death, in 1997, thus marked the end of an era in more ways than one.

This incident involved, of course, a great deal more than a change of leadership. Hemorrhaging at a quarter-million-member loss per year, organized labor had by the middle 1990s reached its rendezvous with a predetermined destiny. More than fifty years earlier, labor leaders (not excluding Communists) had altogether willingly consented in the creation of the hardened structures which had later protected the CIA-tainted star chamber around Sweeney's predecessor, Lane Kirkland, against any and all democratic opposition.

These earlier leaders had clasped federal assistance in the dues checkoff system, when the persuasion of recalcitrant employers to accept unionization meant predictable conditions (i.e., union-imposed discipline) for production. By that means, they had of their own accord wiped out the vestiges

of shop-steward systems that might have given ordinary workers means of redress against union leadership. It had taken not much more willingness for the majority of them (including quite a number of former Communist) to agree to the expulsion of those unions unwilling to toe President Harry Truman's Cold War line, a favorite solution for employers, the FBI, aspiring bureaucrats, and conservative union leaders alike to the "unrest" of the postwar years. The wholesale expulsions of left-led unions in 1949, the associated Red Scare that decimated the most racially integrated unions and eclipsed "Operation Dixie" to organize the South, meant the end of labor as a social movement. Unprepared for changes in production and uninterested in constituencies primarily female and/or nonwhite, the AFL-CIO could not even hold onto its labor empire. Two generations later, what scholars call the "breakdown of labor's social contract" was nearly complete.

In 1995, to the great surprise of most observers, leading unionists escorted reputed radicals back in through the front door. Service Employees president John Sweeney, well known for efficiency in organizing (but definitely not for any unusual commitment to democratic union procedure), arrived in office with a slate of activists best known for their participation in militant struggles and for their eagerness to draw non-whites and women into the movement.

The symbolism of reversal still lacks certain decisive elements. It remains very much to be seen how even enlightened labor leaders could rebuild the labor movement without significant stirrings from below; and what their own organizing initiatives, not to speak of their proposed alliances with other reform and radical groups, might bring into being.

Still, the new situation has produced many odd and remarkable moments. In May 1997, John Sweeney addressed a private meeting in Washington of seventy-five unabashedly left-wing labor-history scholars, artists, campus activists and older scholar-intellectuals with a message of hope and determination. Labor was "back from the dead," he proclaimed, making a none-too-subtle comment on the Kirkland era. Now it would come to its own through an alliance with progressive social movements. Secretary-Treasurer Linda Chavez-Thompson, the first woman and the first Chicano ever to serve in such a high capacity, drove home the message. Labor had to be militant, had to be progressive, and had to support feminists and environmentalists among others if it expected to be supported in return.¹

The most distinguished of the scholars on hand, Yale professor David Montgomery, had been fingered by labor during the 1950s, blacklisted from his machinist trade just before entering graduate school. National Organization of Women founder Betty Friedan, in those same dark '50s a columnist for the proscribed *UE News*, had for decades been at loggerheads with the bluntly anti-feminist Meany-Kirkland leadership. The main body of labor

historians on hand, now themselves advanced into middle age, had provided the backbone of scholarly revisionism, displacing the hagiographic school of labor history and giving the unionists low marks for their historic racism, redbaiting, and otherwise destructive behavior.

The consequences of such a *tête-à-tête* are difficult to anticipate. Joined with the public symbolism of rallies in Watsonville, California (for mostly unorganized strawberry workers), and Detroit (for the pressman ingloriously defeated in the *Detroit News* strike), and many less public efforts at mobilizing allies, the unofficial appeal to the left signaled at least a dramatic turn from within American labor. Not since the “hungry ‘thirties,” when mass strikes and new federal legislation offered the energy and legal means to industrial unionism, had the outreach been so bold. Then, it had taken the dramatic CIO breakaway from AFL conservatism to effect a near revolution, as miners’ leader John L. Lewis quietly invited the proscribed Communists into the center of organizing campaigns. As neoconservatives close to the old labor leadership warned publicly against the dangerous potential of militant unions, and as *New York Times* columnists viewed with concern the leftward-shifting political tides of Europe, the lines seemed to be drawn as they had not been for generations. What lay ahead?

Much depended upon labor’s capacity to speak for the unemployed, the underemployed, and the underrepresented within the United States—and beyond. As Jobs with Justice sought to build coalitions around American urban zones, true internationalism of the new kind could now be found at institutions like the Resource Center for the Americas, based in Minneapolis. The product of the solidarity movement which peaked during the middle 1980s around anti-interventionist campaigns, the center publicized and helped coordinate campaigns by Mexicans, Guatemalans, and others “south of the border” with Americans and Canadians. Similarly, the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras, founded in 1989 by religious organizations and unions, resolved to improve conditions in factories along the border cities and strengthen links to several Mexican unions independent of the corrupted official Mexican Congress of Labor, the CJM. While the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), backed heavily by the Clinton-Gore team, had created misery demanding redress and a wild increase at the number of maquiladoras with sub-poverty-level wages, spewing new levels of toxins along the border, earlier labor leadership saw only the danger of radicals gaining influence. Now, however, the AFL-CIO began to move in the other direction. As the NAFTA-exaggerated crisis in Mexican society and the Mexican economy continued—the vaunted “recovery” being a financial bonanza for the wealthy classes—the possibilities for real internationalism loomed.

Official labor gestures might yet be empty phrases or amount to no more than throwing a few dollars in the right direction. Activists complained

justifiably that the plane fares of sending AFL-CIO officials to Watsonville would alone have set various useful organizing projects in motion. But at a minimum, the accelerating struggle against NAFTA expansion put the White House (and especially presidential aspirant Al Gore) on a hot seat for the environmental and labor-standard protections that the free trade enthusiasts had obviously sought to avoid entirely. Even cross-border mural projects showed light in the dark tunnel of the NAFTAized Americas.

Such assorted activities also pointed toward one of the great unrealized goals of labor reformers during the 1960–80s; networking and communication among workers themselves, within and outside normal union channels, across the state, the country, or the world. Electronic mail, substituting in some ways for the union hall once rooted (during pre-suburban times) in the neighborhood and serving as social meeting center, open up space for what labor historian and activist Staughton Lynd calls “horizontal” labor activity. Abandonment of the vertical style, shaped after corporate (or military) models, is not likely to be easy or come soon. But it is closer to the vision of the Industrial Workers of the World than anything seen since.

The least “new” element of the AFL-CIO leadership has been continued obeisance to whatever the Democrats have to offer, especially in the presidential race. The millions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of staff hours spent on phone banks with get-out-the-vote messages surely made waves with Republicans. For the first time in several decades, conservative candidates and GOP spot commercials issued dark warning about “big labor” special interests—as if the politicians of both parties hadn’t made catering to business’s special interests the central meaning of politics during the same era.

In that weakness lay the potency of labor’s tenacious Old Right, by no means counted out. Headed by an unrecalcitrant Albert Shanker until his death, the cohort deeply involved with both intelligence agencies and conservative foundations quietly made contingency plans to return sections of the discredited leadership to high office. The American Federation of Teachers (more precisely its New York office, the United Federation of Teachers), the bricklayers’ union leadership, and the anti-reform section of the Teamsters were, according to all reports, in the forefront of such scheming. If John Sweeney’s bold mobilization of energies and alliances on the left failed to produce the new level of membership, if its new allies could be attacked and isolated by a coalition of neoliberals and neoconservatives, the Old Right plan had more than a modest opportunity to succeed.

In any case, labor had to go forward with accelerating speed or slip backward toward a familiar abyss. In the flagship empire of the global economy, it could strive to serve as the home base of a worldwide company union, as

the AFL-CIO did until its internal leadership collapsed. Or it could go far to coalesce the movement needed to make that opposition possible.

NOTE

1. The author attended this meeting and is a member of the Coordinating Committee of the organization founded there: Scholars and Artists and Writers for Social Justice. Other prominent members include AFL-CIO Education Director Bill Fletcher, journalist Ellen Willis, academics Robin D.G. Kelley, Francis Fox Piven, and Ellen Schrecker, muralist Mike Alewitz, and cartoonist Gary Huck.