

PHILLIPS, LISA. *A Renegade Union. Interracial Organizing and Labor Radicalism.* [The Working Class in American History.] University of Illinois Press, Urbana [etc.] 2013. xv, 231 pp. Ill. \$50.00. doi:10.1017/S002085901400008X

Local 65 may not have been the “renegade union” that this book’s title suggests, but it certainly was a distinctive union that sought to organize workers that many, if not all, other labor organizations had overlooked. Formed by Jewish sales clerks in or close to the Communist Party on New York’s Lower East Side in 1933, the union targeted low-wage, dead-end jobs in the city’s vast service sector, particularly the “invisible” (p. 33) men and women employed in the wholesale and distribution sectors of the city’s economy. Initially adopting a “geographical [...] area” (p. 43) or “catch-all” (p. 106) approach, organizers enlisted as many workers as possible on the streets and neighborhoods surrounding its core, reaching 15,000 members by 1946 and 40,000 by the end of that decade, earning a “reputation as a strong, militant union” (p. 61). The hostile environment of the Cold War, however, put Local 65 on the defensive and by 1949 it split from the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to pursue an independent course. Allied with several other communist-led unions ousted from the CIO in its purge of the hard left, it swam against the era’s anti-union tide with considerable difficulty and limited success before its top leaders broke decisively with the Communist Party, steering the union back into the CIO. Bereft of its anti-capitalist critique and some of its long-time CP organizers, the union continued to endorse progressive causes, especially civil rights, in the 1950s and 1960s.

Lisa Phillips’s study of Local 65 (the union’s name changed multiple times over the years; it is today known as the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union) offers a largely top-down account of one union’s development over three decades through an examination of its leaders’ visions and maneuverings in and out of the larger labor movement. Arthur Osman, the union’s principle founder and its president for two decades, was one of thousands who “processed, packaged, transported, sold, and otherwise ‘distributed’” (p. 17) garments wholesale in New York when he first organized what would become Local 65 in 1933. A committed communist, he exhibited “arrogant tendencies” in the eyes of his fellow organizers, who also saw in him an “inspirational leader and a ‘brilliant’ organizer” (p. 48). Osman, fellow leader David Livingston, and other top organizers on the union’s payroll were “about as ‘pro-Stalinist’ as they could get”, Phillips explains, “following the ‘party line’ on everything” (p. 10). Indeed, one longtime leftist leader remembered Local 65 as “pretty much of a sectarian organization” (p. 28) vis-à-vis the labor movement. Although the union’s structure was “designed to maximize rank-and-file participation” (p. 49), Osman and his fellow officers exerted a “great deal of control and discipline” over the institution. Its four-to-five-person Executive Council controlled the “flow of information” (p. 49), and instructed elected stewards at mandatory weekly meetings on matters ranging from the history of the labor movement and the “relationship between capital and labor” to, ironically, “trade union democracy” (p. 49). Theoretically, Phillips notes, union members were “kept well informed about what was going on in the union, and had the ability to influence union policies”. But the union’s structure “also lent itself to a type of paternalistic, educational approach” that one observer claimed “bordered on indoctrination” (p. 49).

What of the men and women who enlisted in the union’s ranks? With a few exceptions, Local 65’s “invisible” workers remain invisible, as do the specific conditions of their “grueling” (p. 21) work, their engagement in union affairs, and the actual improvements in their lives on the job. They attended meetings, received instructions from their leaders, and periodically went on strike. What they thought about their union’s changing left-wing politics or what say, if any, they had in formulating union policy is less clear, for their voices are rarely heard in this volume. At times, though, glimmers of rank-and-file

discontent bubble up to the surface. After World War II, union leaders' efforts at pushing left-wing political candidates ran up against widespread indifference. Jack Paley, a top union official and a communist, queried secondary leaders about why workers were "not more enthusiastic" (p. 81) about candidates endorsed by the union and the CIO's left-wing Political Action Committee in 1946. Some blamed lazy shop stewards who failed to educate their members properly, but one offered a more blunt explanation: Some delegates believed that the union had "endorsed reds" (p. 81). Whether there was grassroots opposition to other left-wing stances adopted by the union – the endorsement of the wartime no-strike pledge, its opposition to the Marshall Plan, or refusal to sign the anti-communist affidavits required by the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, for instance – is a matter left unexplored. So too is the decision of Osman and Livingston to break with the communists in 1952. The decision "came as a shock to many of the union's members" (p. 137), Phillips concludes, but the only people whose responses she records are communist leaders. No rank-and-file perspectives are provided.

Although Local 65 prided itself on its "interracial organizing" – highlighted in the book's subtitle – Phillips's assessment of its internal racial dynamics and civil rights efforts similarly suffers from a lack of members' perspectives. The union's "Friends of 65" program which operated like a social club and home for "community-based social events" in New York (p. 54), Phillips contends, proved popular among blacks and "played a major role in changing the ethnic and racial composition of the union". But the main source of information is a single black communist member and union staffer, Morris Doswell, not the men and women who made use of the "Friends of 65" program or who joined the union. To the important question of how Local 65 made black workers "feel at home", the answer is provided by a white communist, who reported that the "integration of black and Hispanic workers did not present the union with much of a problem" (p. 57). As for achievements on the civil rights battlefield, Phillips gives Local 65 too much credit and other non-communist unions too little. If Local 65 and its left-wing allies "added abolishing poll taxes, passing anti-lynching laws, and securing fair employment legislation to its list of goals years before the famous *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case" (p. 117), as she notes, they had plenty of company from numerous unions outside the CP's orbit. When she claims that Local 65 "pushed for the passage of full employment and anti-discrimination legislation during and after World War II well before civil rights organizations took up the fight in the 1960s", she misrepresents the latter's agendas and campaigns of the 1940s and 1950s.

What Phillips does not demonstrate convincingly is what, precisely, the union's left-wing politics meant for its on-the-ground operations. While Local 65's drive to organize workers others ignored and attend to issues of racial discrimination undoubtedly flowed from its leaders' political commitments, other unions, without communist politics, also pursued the unskilled and advanced civil rights, in some cases as or more vigorously than Local 65. On larger political matters, the leaders' politics were on clear display. During the 1930s, Osman denounced the Ku Klux Klan, American racism, and fascism at labor conventions. During World War II, the union's fervent embrace of the no-strike pledge led its leaders to denounce a related union's strike against the intransigent Montgomery Ward company in Chicago in 1944. After the war, union leaders followed the Communist Party's stance by embracing the quixotic and disastrous presidential campaign of former Vice President Henry Wallace. But beyond their important catch-all organizing approach and their commitment to racial equality – central to left-led unions but hardly their monopoly – what did Local 65 leaders' communism mean?

Like other left unions, Local 65 was willing to "blame" the capitalist system for continued unemployment and underemployment" (p. 112), and saw "capitalism's private ownership and the drive for profit" as the "problems" (p. 112). The "Communist-oriented unions", Phillips insists, "carried with them a broad understanding of the links between 'for-profit' systems and discrimination" (p. 70), though the "broad understanding" that emerges in her pages resembles

more party sloganeering than enduring and penetrating insights. Describing the party's views, she explains that the "only way to combat the capitalist system was to launch some kind of revolution to abolish private ownership altogether" (p. 76), and replace it with "[c]ollectively 'owned' businesses heavily regulated by the state" (p. 76). Putting aside the rather fuzzy explanation of communist ideology, we are left with the question of how any of this informed the union's actual organizing efforts or how the rank and file responded to these analyses.

The book's most fascinating – and confusing – contribution centers on internal union divisions after Local 65 – now called District 65 – departed the CIO at the height of the domestic Cold War. Leaders Osman and Livingston found themselves at odds with other communist union leaders ostensibly over how to organize southern black workers. Among other issues was the fate of Local 22 of the Food, Tobacco, and Allied Workers in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, with Osman and Livingston recommending in 1952 that the local's eight remaining members be transferred to another local, and black communists charging their white communist counterparts with an "attack on the Negro people" (p. 133) for abandoning them. The party's charge of "white chauvinism" – the destructive and manipulative tactic that absorbed much of the CP's energies in these years – against Osman and Livingston was "a bit more of a stretch" (p. 139) and an effort to isolate the two union leaders, Phillips concedes. The charge was off-base, she bizarrely suggests, drawing on dubious whiteness studies literature, because the two men were both Jewish, "very different from 'white' in this time period" (p. 140). But their "increasing rigidity" – a point made several times without much explanation – was a "clear sign of 'chauvinism,' though not 'white'" (p. 140). In the end, Osman and Livingston broke decisively with the CP and eventually re-affiliated with the CIO.

What is opaque in Phillips's account is the process by which the two men concluded that the party with which they had been affiliated for two decades no longer warranted their support. Neither the issues on which they and the party agreed or disagreed, nor their rationale for the political divorce, come into focus. That does not stop Phillips from concluding that the break was something of a tragedy. In what she sees as "one of the ugliest episodes" in the union's history, Osman and Livingston had "sold out" the very members" they "should have celebrated: people who had, like they had, built unions from the bottom up" (p. 128). If the union survived, its solvency came "at a considerable cost" for a "left-oriented, critical voice" (p. 158) was lost. One black communist, Phillips highlights, observed that though District 65 remained a militant union that was "sensitive to the issues of blacks", it "lost mobilization behind the issues", and failed to mobilize its "white and black leadership" (p. 163), whatever that means. The "union had changed after the split", a white communist insisted, for an organization "can't be slightly anti-Communist and have a movement of any kind" (p. 164). But in the case of District 65, it was and it did, for the union threw itself into civil rights campaigns in subsequent years in substantial ways. That is not enough for Phillips, for "without the Communist left, a sustained attempt to combat the institutional structures that promoted racial discrimination and segregation slowed as well" (p. 168). That conclusion is belied by *A Renegade Union's* inability to demonstrate persuasively how the communist left's presence in Local/District 65 either accurately diagnosed institutional structures of oppression or effectively combatted them. It is further undermined by the book's unwillingness to recognize the critiques and efforts of non-communist activists to keep alive the economic component of civil rights.

"Those who write about Communist-influenced unions throw themselves into a pit of controversy from the get go" (p. 9), Phillips contends at the beginning of her book. The debates between revisionists and traditionalists over the Communist Party's character, program, and role in the labor movement is more complex than she admits, and the revisionists supportive of left-led unions still outnumber their critics. In this instance, Phillips convincingly demonstrates that Local/District 65 was a scrappy, iconoclastic (if not renegade) union committed to organizing those employed in the exploitative wholesale and distributive trades

and whose leaders drew their inspiration from the Communist Party's larger vision. What she does not demonstrate is that the communists' analysis possessed enduring value, infused the union's campaigns in any distinctive way, or held any attraction to the union's membership. Nor does she fully recognize how the Party's policies constrained or hampered the union, or demonstrate that the union's top leaders' break with the Party in any way damaged the institution as a progressive, activist force. *A Renegade Union* offers a valuable account of an important union whose story has not yet been told fully, but it does not make the case for the superiority of communist-led unions in the realms of labor and race relations.

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CHENG, WEI-CHUNG. *War, Trade and Piracy in the China Seas (1622–1683)*. [TANAP Monographs on the History of Asian-European Interaction, Vol. 16.] Brill, Leiden [etc.] 2013. xxiii, 365 pp. Ill. € 88.00; \$114.00. doi:10.1017/S0020859014000091

This book provides a solid overview of a fascinating period, combining research in Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, and Dutch sources to interweave many different perspectives on a complicated picture of trade, warfare, and diplomacy. Its avowed purpose is to describe the rise and fall of the Cheng dynasty of merchant warlords, principally Cheng Chih-lung (alias Nicolas Iquan), his son Cheng Ch'eng-kung (alias Coxinga), and grandson Cheng Ching, between them spanning most of the seventeenth century. This family story is, however, set against the broader background of the fall of the Ming dynasty and the rise of the Manchus in China, the interests of the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), and the sometimes technically illegal but nevertheless constant trade in various commodities, including Chinese silk and gold, Japanese silver, Taiwanese sugar, Siamese deerskins, and of course pepper, which came increasingly under the control of the Dutch. Cheng Wei-chung uncovers the delicately balanced web of commerce which stretched from the Chinese coast to Japan, Java, and Manila, but which was regularly disrupted by competition and outright conflict. As the leaders of the Cheng dynasty typify, this was a fluid situation where aggression and diplomacy, trade and violence, could be and often were simultaneous activities. For the merchant warlords, this seems to have been cyclic: trade created their opportunities and their wealth, which made them powerful, and with that power they were able to exert more control over trade.

In fourteen quite short but well-paced chapters, Cheng Wei-chung traces this process from the beginnings of Chih-lung's career serving the Ming dynasty against other similar "maritime mercenaries", to Ch'eng-kung's negotiations with both the Ming and the Manchus, leading ultimately to his retreating from China and seizing Taiwan from the Dutch in 1662 before his sudden death. Ching's "tight grip on the China trade" (p. 225) during the later 1660s had collapsed by the end of the next decade, and after Ching's death in 1681 the Cheng forces surrendered to the Manchus in 1683. Though generally well-written, the many strands of the narrative are sometimes integrated a little clumsily; and occasionally there are colourful phrases rather than cogent analysis. When Chih-lung's comrade Li K'uei-ch'i abandoned him in 1628, this was apparently because Chih-lung's