

# REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

---

## Seventh Annual North American Labor History Conference, Wayne State University

*Robert H. Zieger*

Wayne State University

The Seventh Annual North American Labor History Conference was held at Wayne State University, Detroit, October 24–26, 1985. The theme of the conference was “The Era of the CIO, 1935–1955.” The conference observed the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the CIO (and of the National Labor Relations Act). There were fifteen sessions involving sixty scholars, labor veterans, and/or current participants in labor-management and political activities.

At the heart of the conference were sessions featuring scholarly papers and critiques on various aspects of the CIO and its times. The overall tone of these sessions was far from celebratory, with a sense of disappointment and wasted opportunity on the part of the CIO and its various arms and affiliates being the dominant motif. Thus, William Serrin, in his *New York Times* article of October 28 covering the conference, observed of the CIO on the basis of the papers he heard, “It never represented more than a few million workers, and it lasted only 20 years. . . .” He did note that it “brought immense zeal to labor and organized workers in the auto, rubber, steel and other industries . . . ,” but his account reflected the scholarly emphasis on negative aspects of the CIO heritage. The “purge” of the Left after World War II, Serrin noted, was frequently invoked, with several papers contending that “the organization never recovered its strength” after the ouster of pro-Soviet unions. Commenting on papers by Barbara Griffith and Michael Honey on Operation Dixie, Serrin reported that when the CIO attempted to organize the South, “some union people were racists and thus hurt efforts to organize black workers.” Summarizing his general observations of the key points made at a number of sessions, Serrin concluded that “Both the CIO and member unions were often undemocratic, the conference was told.”

Since the papers and critiques reflected the priorities of academic scholars, few of the sessions featured the more famous events in CIO history. There

*International Labor and Working Class History*

No. 29, Spring 1986, pp. 92–96

© 1986 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois

was little mention of John L. Lewis, for example, nor did such episodes as the Flint Sit-Down, the Republic Steel Massacre, wartime strikes, the post-World War II strike wave, the activities of CIO-PAC, or the AFL-CIO merger of 1955 claim much attention. Most papers reflected extensive archival and oral history research. Papers by Paul Street, Roger Horowitz, and Rick Halpern celebrated the militancy and inter-racial efforts of the Packinghouse Workers, an important secondary CIO affiliate. Biting commentary by former NAACP Labor Secretary Herbert Hill contrasted the UPWA's commitment to racial equality on and off the job with the complacency and even cynicism of other affiliates and of the AFL-CIO establishment. Papers by Nancy Gabin and Ruth Milkman discussed the "window of opportunity" for women workers offered by two vigorous affiliates, the United Auto Workers and the United Electrical Workers, respectively. Gabin stressed the partial character of UAW accommodation of its female membership, while Milkman focused on the structural determinants of union behavior in dealing with gender issues. Animated commentary by veteran UAW activist and staff member Edith Van Horn, and a more controversial critique by Nelson Lichtenstein, helped highlight this session.

For obvious reasons, a paper by Martin Halpern on Detroit Mayor Coleman Young's career as a left-wing CIO activist in the Motor City after World War II drew particular attention. Halpern's focus on the theme of racism and the deleterious effects of vocal anticommunism in CIO circles after the war brought spirited response from a large audience that included a number of Detroit labor veterans. First-hand commentary by David Moore, now on the staff of Detroit Congressman George W. Crockett, Jr., a sober analysis of these themes by Walter Reuther biographer John Barnard, and some judicious reminders of the limits of personal recollection and oral history by Chair Sidney Fine contributed to a memorable panel.

A session on the international aspects of CIO activities after World War II also brought together scholars and historical actors. Jonathan Schmeer contributed a careful and provocative discussion of the options confronting the Labour party in Great Britain at war's end. Peter Weiler analyzed the shifting balance of power within the CIO at the time of the formation of the World Federation of Trade Unions in 1945, stressing the limits of the anticommunist orthodoxy becoming dominant in American unions. Michael Morrison, however, took a more generous approach to CIO difficulties with the WFTU in the years of the late 1940s. Critic Victor Reuther's vigorous recollections capped the session.

The theme of ideological conflict also appeared prominently at a session conducted by Steven Rosswurm and Toni Gilpin on the use of the Freedom of Information Act in CIO research. Recounting their experiences in tracking down and using FBI reports relating to the Farm Equipment Workers, a CIO affiliate with a strong pro-Soviet orientation, Rosswurm and Gilpin cast light

on the nature and accessibility of FBI records and commented sharply on the extent and perniciousness of governmental repression and surveillance in the postwar period. Reuther Library Director Philip Mason urged caution in using records of this nature, noting that copious materials at the Reuther Library and other depositories remained the most important materials for the history of the FE. Ideological concerns in a different context were examined by historians Kenneth Waltzer and Daniel Leab at an evening showing of the recent documentary film, *Seeing Red*. Both scholars observed that the subjects chosen by the film makers for extended interview treatment were somewhat atypical in that they were among the relatively few people who remained continuously in the Communist party until the events and revelations of 1956.

Ethnic and urban dimensions of the history of the CIO were examined in two sessions. Papers by Dominic A. Pacyga and Judith Stein examined the key roles of black and Eastern European workers in the success of the initial thrust for organization in the 1930s. A broader commentary by Gary Gerstle stressed the competing loyalties experienced by immigrant and second generation workers in the 1930s and 1940s, so powerful were the rival claims of Church, Country, and Union. The urban context of CIO organizing was elucidated in papers by Joshua Freeman, who focused on the distinctive political culture of New York's Irish transport workers, and Darryl Holter, who related Milwaukee's unique socialist tradition to the rise of industrial unionism in the 1930s and 1940s. Daniel Nelson reminded the panelists and audience of the sharp limits on union success imposed by capitalist dynamics and of the limits to laborite militancy imposed by the nature of the American working class.

In a particularly fruitful session, students of Canadian industrial unionism, Jerry Lembcke and Robert Storey, examined CIO affiliates in their efforts to organize basic extractive and metallurgical sectors in Canada. Lembcke advanced a Marxist-structuralist thesis to suggest the reasons for the limited nature of industrial unionism's gains, while Storey highlighted the distinctive features of Canadian industry's and government's obstructionism in SWOC's efforts to plant locals in Canadian soil. Judicious and cautionary comments by veteran UAW and CLC activist Dan Benedict brought a dimension to the session that was both scholarly and personal.

In addition to the wide range of historical papers, the conference featured several sessions dealing with more contemporary concerns. Michael Piore addressed the structural problems confronting the unions and posited initiatives in collective bargaining that might make organized labor more viable in the drastically changed economic landscape. Frances Fox Piven analyzed recent voter registration projects, arguing that despite disappointments, the evidence gathered supported the thesis that a large number of lower income people who could provide the basis for significant electoral shifts remain to be registered. In a spirited commentary, former UAW president Douglas Fraser painted a

more pessimistic picture of voter registration prospects, while cautiously welcoming Piore's fresh look at the collective bargaining environment. Additional commentary by Jane Slaughter of the Detroit publication *Labor Notes* deplored recent concessionary bargaining trends and called into question the efficacy of recent collaborative approaches to labor-management relations.

In another session with a contemporary focus, panelists Katherine Van Wezel Stone, Leonard Page, and Patricia Dennis, a member of the National Labor Relations Board, assessed "Fifty Years of the Wagner Act." Stone and Page were sharply critical of the drift of recent labor law, with Stone pointing to key cases in the 1940s (e.g., the Steelworkers' Trilogy) and UAW Associate General Counsel Page stressing the increasingly unequal footing of labor and management in the board's more recent proceedings. Board Member Dennis defended the Reagan board's efforts to cut red tape and to provide maximum freedom of choice. Sharp commentary from the audience was highlighted by Melvyn Dubofsky's challenging perspectives on the limited extent to which the Taft-Hartley Act succeeded in its sponsors' desire to reverse Wagner Act labor policy. Dubofsky stressed, as did Stone, the role of court rulings and board policies in the growing disadvantages faced by unions.

In an evening session both celebratory of the living history of the CIO and starkly contemporary, Victor Reuther offered a wide-ranging overview of fifty years of labor history and a stinging critique of recent developments in the labor movement. In contrast to many of the academic authors, Reuther emphasized the CIO's idealistic and democratic character. In viewing trends in recent contract negotiations—the UAW's recent Saturn contract, for example—however, the veteran activist was more critical. He called for renewed political energy on the part of organized labor, more vigorous public voice in economic planning and plant closure, and an invigorated labor-liberal-black coalition. Reuther, who was CIO European director in the early 1950s, rebuked the AFL-CIO for its policy positions on arms control and Central America.

A final conference session brought UAW local unionists together with academic and archival experts on the subject of local union history. Michael Kerwin of the UAW Education Department, Malcolm Evans of the Michigan Labor History Society, Stephen Meyer (Wayne State Rockefeller Fellow), and Warner Pflug of the Reuther Library commented on sources, strategies, and problems of local union research. Local union historians and activists met informally with academic historians, discussing the role of local history in the ongoing life of the local unions. This session was jointly sponsored by the UAW Education Department and the Michigan Labor History Society.

As is usually the case with historical conferences, no conclusions were reached. A general consensus, however, did seem to emerge on several important themes. First, the contrast between the vigor and energy of labor history scholarship, on the one hand, and the crisis in the labor movement itself, on

the other, was an unpleasant, but widely observed, motif. Second, institutional labor history, stimulated by sensitivity to gender, racial, and social themes, seems to be alive and well, at least for the era of the CIO. Finally, despite a spate of excellent papers on a variety of subjects, many participants were impressed with how much of the labor history of the past fifty years remains unchronicled and underanalyzed. Thus, had the conference adopted a theme song, it might well have been "We've Only Just Begun."

In 1986, the Eighth Annual North American Labor History Conference will be held at Woodsworth College, University of Toronto. As of this writing, no date or theme has been selected. Inquiries should be directed to Arthur Kruger, Principal, Woodsworth College, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1A9. Subsequent conferences will be held at Wayne State.