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Excerpt
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Part I

LABOR RADICALISM REVISITED

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UNSETTLING OLD SCORES:
LABOR RADICALISM
ENCOUNTERS CONVENTIONAL
WISDOM

CONVENTIONAL WISDOMS

A new brand of unionism exploded on the American scene in the 1930s. Between 1934 and 1937, general strikes were waged in San Francisco and Minneapolis. Automobile and rubber workers staged sit-down strikes in Michigan and Ohio. Miners took over mines and steelworkers shut down steel mills in Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Throughout the country, workers previously ignored by or excluded from unions were busy being organized into the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

Working-class insurgency in this period was new in part because it was political in the broadest sense. More than ideologically radical, the CIO was radically “political.” Unlike the American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions, at least initially, CIO affiliates were more internally democratic and, to the extent they practiced industrial unionism, antielitist as well. CIO unions were also, relatively speaking, more inclusive on matters of race and gender.¹ Their direct action tactics, moreover, made political participation an organizing strategy. These expressions of working-class insurgency were perhaps most profoundly political because they made workplace governance an issue. Workers insisted on the right to participate in decisions about work; and they forced factory owners to observe that right officially. They compelled owners to bargain in good faith; and they refused to work until employers formally recognized their organizations.

1 The CIO's practice regarding racial equality was uneven, reluctant, and often flawed. It should not be exaggerated. See Herbert Hill (1987). Relative to the AFL and past practices, however, the CIO represented a different kind of unionism.

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CIO successes empowered ordinary workers and seriously restricted management's unilateral authority on the shopfloor.

By most accounts, this battle for industrial citizenship did not last very long. Like a meteor, it flashed across America's working-class horizon for barely a historical moment, leaving almost no traces. By World War II, or immediately after, CIO unions signed contracts settling the governance issue in management's favor. Workers were prevented from participating directly in production decisions. Laws were passed that outlawed secondary boycotts, and solidarity strikes became illegal. Bureaucratic organization was imposed on rebellious, radically democratic industrial workers. The CIO, some say, struck a devil's bargain with employers: In return for a labor relations system that guaranteed union recognition, the industrial union movement would forswear independent political action. Fights over who would govern the workplace, and how, were declared out of bounds. Militant CIO unionism rapidly became just another version of what some called "business unionism." In the words of one labor critic, unionists "chose to struggle only on the safe terrain of wages and benefits. . . . (T)he question of workplace regime was settled" (Moody, 1988:71).

Given this turn of events, scholars typically interpret American labor history as a history of defeat, accommodation, or incorporation. The unionism practiced by CIO locals in the 1930s is seen as a momentary blip on the American labor movement's otherwise straight-line trajectory from craft to business unionism. The standard account of the history of labor in America is one of "false promises," co-optation, and surrender. Militancy, shopfloor struggles over governance, and union democracy are located in the past, all prominent features of an exciting social experiment that either failed or was never given a chance.

The CIO's putative failure to expand the battle for industrial citizenship into a war for shopfloor control is taken by some to prove that AFL leader Samuel Gompers was right: Anything other than "pure and simple unionism" is doomed to failure. The demise of militancy, they conclude, confirms labor theorist Selig Perlman's insight that "the only acceptable 'consciousness' for American labor as a whole is a 'job consciousness'" (Perlman, 1928:169). Thus, left to its own devices, the natural state of the American labor movement would be conservative.

Over the years, Gompers's and Perlman's insights have become the

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conventional wisdom concerning American unionism and working-class politics. To Sombart's question, "why is there no socialism in America?" conventional wisdom responds: Ideas like class consciousness and class conflict have never taken root in American political soil because they are not native concepts. Rather, they are foreign seeds planted by people unfamiliar with the sociopolitical climate of North American class relations. In the United States, militant trade unionism is tamed into business unionism, incorporated and accommodated by corporate liberal capitalists. America transforms deeply democratic, radically participatory unions into bureaucratic versions of their former militant selves; it replaces class conflict with class cooperation by providing American workers with a package that combines contractual agreements and high wages. In the words of labor historian David Brody (1972:241), "the character of American trade unionism . . . made it an exploiter of radicalism rather than vice versa."

An unlikely consensus has emerged from this reading of labor history. People who would ordinarily disagree share a similar assessment of American trade unionism. From Vladimir Lenin to Selig Perlman, Robert Michels to Herbert Marcuse, or C. Wright Mills, Andre Gorz to Samuel Gompers, there is a consensus: In America, workers' organized efforts to gain or retain direction over their lives on the shopfloor are doomed to failure. Although they might dispute the reasons why, there is little disagreement on the outcome. Each would agree that despite various twists and turns, American labor history follows a relatively straight line: It begins with embryonic forms of "political" unionism and ends in "business" unionism. For political actors on the socialist left, this reading confirms their view that unions are not capable of establishing industrial citizenship; it is further proof of American "exceptionalism" and workers' "false consciousness." For activists on the libertarian right, the fate of unionism is another argument against it, an additional reason for individual and market solutions to workplace problems.

EXCEPTIONS THAT PROVE THE RULE

Hidden by this consensus is a handful of unions that did not follow the presumed CIO trajectory. The most notorious unions in this exclusive

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club are the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), the Hospital Workers' Union – Local 1199, the Independent Textile Union (ITU), the Transportation Workers Union (TWU), the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers' Union (MMSWU), and the National Maritime Union (NMU). These unions are most often recognized for their charismatic leaders and unabashedly left-wing politics. James Matles (UE), Leon Davis (Local 1199), Joseph Schmetz (ITU), Mike Quill (TWU), Maurice Travis (MMSWU), Blackie Myers (NMU), and Harry Bridges (ILWU) were colorful figures, powerful leaders, and dynamic articulators of a militant labor perspective. Six of them were accused of being communists, and the seventh, Schmetz, was thought to be a socialist. Indeed, in 1949, the UE and ILWU were expelled from the CIO for being under "communist influence."

Although they were notorious for the political eccentricities of their leadership, these unions share a less sensational, but perhaps more fundamental feature: Long after most CIO unions purportedly began to practice business unionism, they continued to pursue a version of early CIO unionism. Some of them still do. Despite contractual agreements to cooperate, and even collaborate with management on matters of production, these unions organized themselves to challenge management's rule on the shopfloor and make the job site contested terrain. In the face of legislation banning solidarity they found ways to unite workers across occupations.

Most Americans assume these unions were exceptions to the rule, and that they probably still are. Scholars have analyzed them as "deviant" case studies. Their influence has been minimized, and their significance restricted to the political margins. Many scholars have been more interested in the color of the party card carried by the leaders of these unions than the state of class relations on the shopfloors they organized, or the characteristics these unions share with other former CIO affiliates.² Because these unions are assumed to be exceptions to the rule, a series of explanations

2 Fortunately, this is changing. A new generation of labor historians has recently focused on some of these unions. See for example, Fink and Greenberg (1989); Freeman (1988); Gerstle (1989); Kimeldorf (1988); Nelson (1988); Schatz (1983). For review essays commenting on the development of this new approach see Brinkley (1990); Isserman (1989); Lichtenstein (1989).

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has emerged to account for their exceptionalism. Over the years, these constructions have become conventional wisdom. And like most conventional wisdom, these explanations are rarely questioned. Hardly ever does anyone ask, how unique did these unions actually turn out to be? Or, what do they *have in common* with the rest of American labor?

Recently, however, historiographic research has raised questions about just how distinctive these unions were and are. Rick Fantasia's case studies of the collective action exercised by ordinary unionists (1988), for example, indicate that "cultures of solidarity" and militancy are not restricted to these surviving radical unions. Lizabeth Cohen's history of the CIO in Chicago (1990) and Steven Fraser's biography of Sidney Hillman (1991) strongly suggest that the differences between "political" and "business" unionism have been overstated. The unions they examine fit both categories – sometimes simultaneously. Gary Gerstle's study of radical unionists in Woonsocket, Rhode Island (1989), moreover, shows that the spirit of radical unionism was sometimes clothed in conservative garb and spoken in the language of Americanism.³

This is a book about one of those unions: the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU). Focusing on a major ILWU longshore local (Local 10, San Francisco), the book is based on three years of extensive field research: hanging out at the union hall and the bars surrounding it, sitting in on grievance committee meetings and contract negotiations, riding with business agents, and being aboard ships and docks when cargo was loaded and unloaded.⁴ This careful look at the routine practices of San Francisco longshoremen in their everyday working lives suggests that in the ILWU, resistance to management's authority is collectively legitimated behavior, and explicitly acknowledged as *good* trade unionism. More than fifty years after the 1934 general strike that gave birth to this union, the San Francisco longshoremen still fight with management over workplace terrain. On the job, they use their working knowledge and working principles to challenge and contest management's contractual prerogatives; and, in the grievance machinery, they pursue disagreements over questions of workplace regime. Thus, the San Fran-

3 For a different view, one that argues communist unions left a distinctive legacy, see Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (1989, 1991a).

4 A more thorough discussion of the research methodology can be found in the Appendix.

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cisco longshoremen's union continues to wage what David Montgomery calls the "historic forms of working-class struggle" (1980:166). Longshoremen and their employers still fight over whose rules for how to work will be followed, which side's language will govern the workplace, and whose method for determining merit will prevail. The union continues to operate democratically, and has devised ingenious forms of contractual direct action on the job and in the grievance machinery. The exciting social experiment begun in the CIO five decades ago did not fail in this union; although modified, it is still practiced today.

EXPLAINING AN EXCEPTION

Most people, including many San Francisco longshoremen, would say that these findings confirm received wisdom: The union *is* unique. And they would explain the union's apparent uniqueness in four ways. Sociologists attribute the ILWU's evolution to two factors: domination by communists and other subversive elements, and the isolated character of longshoring.⁵ According to this account, communists using the Bolshevik "organizational weapon" (Selznick) took over unions like the ILWU with a self-conscious strategy of disruption and manipulation. Operating secretly, often violating union democracy, they placed party cadre in key posts and thereby managed to infiltrate these unions.⁶

The second factor they would mention is that longshoring is isolated work (Lipset, 1963), which contributes to an "industrial propensity" for radicalism (Kerr and Siegel, 1964). In this account, certain industries breed radicalism because of their isolation. Radical politics, in this view, are supported by workers living in occupationally homogeneous communities that are isolated by geography and deviant work schedules, and therefore are not exposed to conservative middle-class influences. According to Lipset, lack of contact "with the world outside their own group" explains the radicalism associated with miners, seamen, loggers, fishermen, and dockworkers (1963: chap. 7).

5 This section relies heavily on Kimeldorf (1988: Chap. 1).

6 For other examples of this theory, see Barbash (1948); Epstein and Goldfinger (1950); Galenson (1974); Glazer (1961); Kampelman (1957); Pelling (1960); Prickett (1974); Selznick (1960).

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San Francisco longshoremen have their own two-part theory for why their union is unique. The nature of longshore work, argue observant participants on the San Francisco docks, with its wide range of challenging and changing operational circumstances, makes it different than most industrial labor. The work requires a special combination of ingenuity, skill, and cooperative innovation, making continual supervision impossible. Thus, unlike factory work, longshore efficiency is intrinsically dependent on decentralized initiative (Mills, 1976; Mills and Wellman, 1987; Theriault, 1978; Weir, 1974). ILWU longshoremen also think their contract differentiates them. They point to contractual language which, in their view, makes the ILWU exceptional because it enables them to specify the conditions under which they will work and establishes grounds for refusing to work. They argue that these two circumstances, when combined, distinguish ILWU longshoremen from other American unionists: They can use the contractual agreement to implement their conception of what is safe, sensible, and proper work.

EXCEPTIONALISM REEXAMINED

Contrary to received wisdom, a close look at these accounts suggests they are seriously flawed; they do not explain why or how the ILWU is a unique American union. If the ILWU is unique, it is not because of communist manipulation or isolation. The union's practices are not explained by an omnipotent "red machine" that hijacked the union and secretly directed it. Quite the contrary. According to one student of the ILWU,

Communist-supported insurgents rose to power by winning over the rank and file to their trade union program. Once in office, one of their first acts was to replace the old IIA constitution, which centralized power at the top of the union, with a more open and democratic set of procedures designed to guard against the kinds of organizational abuse that Communists were normally accused of practicing. (Kimeldorf, 1988:10–11)

The number of communists actually operating in the ILWU, moreover, appears to have been consistently exaggerated by both Cold War liberals and Communist Party (CP) sympathizers. One recent assessment con-

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cludes that, “in 1945, the high-water mark of American communism, only 237 West Coast longshoremen – a tiny minority it seems – were officially enrolled in the party. Subscriptions to the *Daily Worker* never exceeded five hundred” (Kimeldorf, 1988:163). Thus, professional revolutionaries “were a minority of the labor force” (Kimeldorf, 1988:163).

To complicate matters, despite its popular image, the ILWU was never, in any serious sense of the term, a “socialist” union. Although its founding president, Harry Bridges, and his supporters expressed socialist beliefs, the ILWU did not. The union never put forth a socialist vision for the future. Its constitution made no reference to “ultimate goals” or “collective ownership.” In fact, being remarkably candid, Bridges is reported to have said: “You can’t go getting mad at the employer because under our system he’s in business to make profits. So you have to try to work out a solution within the system, and ours is admittedly a pretty selfish solution” (McConnell, 1966:327). Most longshoremen, moreover, voted for the Democratic Party, and Bridges voted Republican. Thus, although the ILWU may have had a disproportionate number of communist members, there is little reason to believe communists ran the union contrary to its membership’s wishes, or that the union practiced “communist” politics.

Occupational isolation is an equally unconvincing explanation for ILWU practices. In fact, available evidence suggests the opposite. As Kimeldorf documents, on the West Coast waterfront, “isolation was *inversely* related to radicalism” (1988:13, emphasis added). Dockworkers in San Francisco were one of the ILWU’s most consistently radical units. They were *not*, however, isolated from the city’s general population. San Francisco’s docks were at the core of the city’s industrial geography. In San Pedro, however, the other principal California port some 400 miles south of San Francisco, dockworkers were very isolated from Los Angeles’s cosmopolitan population and were much less responsive to radical politics than their brothers to the north.

The political history of longshore unionism in the Port of New York offers another example of the relationship between isolation and radicalism among waterfront workers. If anything, the self-contained world of New York longshoremen, insulated from the outside by ethnic community and casual employment, contributed to their conservatism and

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reactionary politics.⁷ Isolation, then, is not a very convincing explanation for the ILWU's union practices.

The longshoremen's theory of why their union is exceptional holds up no better. A close look at the nature of longshore work and the contract signed by the ILWU suggests that this union has much more in common with American labor than the longshoremen's theory indicates. Work on Pacific Coast docks is, in crucial respects, similar to most work done by American labor; and the ILWU's longshore contract is, in important ways, a standard American union contract.

Because longshore work ranges from manual labor and skilled craftsmanship to operating technologically advanced machinery, the three major work categories associated with industrial labor are found on the waterfront. Dockworkers are simultaneously craftsmen, operatives, and laborers. The combination of activities required for longshore work, moreover, is required of virtually *all* industrial workers. When one focuses on the cognitive processes and physical activities necessary for longshoring, one finds that waterfront work has considerable common ground with numerous sorts of industrial labor.

All the energies needed to do the variety of work represented in David Montgomery's "house of labor" are necessary ingredients for moving cargo on the waterfront. Like craft labor, longshoring requires "skill and knowledge"; and, like craft labor, initiative is "indispensable to the operation of the enterprise" (Montgomery, 1987:45). Like the common laborer or the "human machine," longshoremen must know "teamwork, adaptability, and the use of such fundamentals of mechanics as inclined planes, pulleys, and levers" (Montgomery, 1987:61). To paraphrase Montgomery, like laborers on construction crews, longshoremen fetch and carry, load or clean up, whatever, wherever, and whenever (1987:63). Like the operative, longshoremen are specialists "bound to repetition of the same task in the same place" (1987:115). The personal qualities necessary for longshoring are comparable to those found among semiskilled workers and craftsmen: "experience, brain power, and adaptability" (1987:115). Like machinists, for dockworkers, "fitting parts together in assembly, or 'erection' of final

7 For a thorough comparison of the ILA and ILWU, see Kimeldorf (1988).