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Rediscovering American Labor

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Rediscovering American Labor

Penn Kemble

IT HAS been almost two decades since the labor movement went out of fashion among liberal and radical intellectuals. Today it is apparent that something of a change is taking place. George Wald, the Harvard scientist who has become a spokesman for academic radicalism, recently brought labor leaders and intellectuals together for a "dialogue." According to a statement issued by Wald and his colleagues, cooperation between academics and labor "... would give the academic community what it now most lacks; a base in the outside community." Jimmy Breslin, who keeps an eye on Brooklyn and Queens for Manhattan's *beau monde*, has been warning that unless the peace movement reaches the workers, more heads will be broken. The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions has sent down a report on the life of an electrician from its Olympian vantage-point in Santa Barbara. The sociological press is full of discussions about "white ethnics," a suitably non-controversial, American term for the working class. Here and there one begins to hear Democratic politicians advertising themselves as candidates who can carry the blue-collar vote.

Political cynicism holds that respect is usually paid to the successful and the powerful. This appears to apply for liberal and radical intellectuals as well as for those who make fewer claims to elevated motives. In all likelihood, labor was courted in the 1930's not simply, as the reminiscing radicals would have it, because labor was then a pure flame of social righteousness. It was rather because the power of the labor movement in politics or on the picket line was so dramatically apparent, while the world of business and the upper classes seemed so unsteady. A good deal of today's revival of interest in labor probably has a similar basis. The political vogues of the 1950's and 1960's have lost their glamor, while the unions, for long the targets of so much snobbish disdain, have shown remarkable durability and vigor.

One could sense a shift in the anti-labor winds back in 1968. First, the United Federation of

Teachers won its bitter strike against the Lindsay administration. Not only had most intellectuals opposed the union: special honors were awarded to union-busters and strike breakers. (Soon after, through the reporting of Martin Mayer and the repudiation by the black community itself of so-called community leaders who had opposed the union, some liberals quietly recognized that the union was not only powerful, it had been right.)

The unions then demonstrated enormous political muscle in the 1968 Presidential elections. Despite widespread liberal indifference and the strong backlash campaign of George Wallace, the labor movement by itself almost carried Hubert Humphrey into the White House. From then until now the unions have had a string of successes: the organization of farm and hospital workers and white-collar employees, the collective-bargaining victories at General Electric and General Motors, the legislative defeats of Haynesworth and Carswell, and the impressive showing in last year's elections, when labor's organization and labor's issues were unquestionably the deciding factors in the revival of the Democratic party. And all this despite a hostile administration and a faltering economy.

In the face of these successes, and the equally impressive record of disappointments that has been built up by the protest movements of the disaffected intelligentsia—the New Left and the New Politics—it is not surprising that some formerly hostile intellectuals are preparing themselves again to accept an alliance with organized labor. It is unlikely, however, that they will be able to do so without reappraising some of the theories and attitudes which have fed the indifference and hostility toward labor within the intellectual community in the past twenty years.

I

MUCH of this indifference and hostility toward the labor movement—and, for that matter, the working class, white ethnics, lower-middle class, and other groups of comparable social status and outlook—was, no matter how much radicalism it may have been spiced with, made of basically conservative dough. The anti-labor posture has often been

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justified with the argument that labor lost its claim to support in the intellectual world by turning conservative in the 1950's. A fairer assessment is that many intellectuals became more conservative, and abandoned labor. During the 1930's intellectuals were often obliged to look at the world from the standpoint of the working man. Many of them took ordinary jobs or worked in the labor movement itself. Government was Left-leaning in the New Deal days, and many writers and artists were employed on government public-works projects. But in the relative affluence of the postwar years many of these same intellectuals moved into secure and well-paying positions in the universities and in publishing. Some even gained admittance to the fringes of the business world, as writers and as consultants to the great foundations. Sources of government support shifted from the WPA to the Department of Defense, the poverty-education complex—and other less visible agencies.

In short, the intellectual community was raised to an unprecedented status and affluence, based on relationships with institutions which depended for their support on the large corporations, the upper classes, and the more conservative branches of a now more conservative government. This is not to argue that the intellectuals were simply bought off by high salaries and other perquisites—although in some cases these assuredly had their impact. For at the same time that many incomes in the academic world were rising, the relative status of the academic world itself was rising—perhaps even at a faster rate. Despite the anti-egghead and McCarthyite sentiments of the early 1950's, by the end of the decade the panic over education precipitated by Sputnik and the automation scare brought a recognition within government and business of the strategic importance of higher education. In the fifteen years between 1950 and 1965, the number of students enrolled in higher education nearly doubled, while the amount of money taken in by universities increased almost six times over.

The effects of this transformation on the academic community itself were reinforced by a parallel change in outlook in the general society. American business regained its footing in the 1950's, and provided the nation with an unprecedented affluence. The government of the New Deal was replaced by the Dixiecrat-Republican coalition, which, while not dismantling the liberal measures taken by its predecessor, at least diminished the prospects of more far-reaching social and economic change. Even if the academic world had not been affected by its own new affluence and status, it would have been influenced by the trends in the wider society.

THE conservatism of the 1950's did not spare even the radical intellectuals, although, to be sure, its impact on them often

took a distinctive form.* Their radicalism now assumed a patrician cast—they were the lonely bearers of high social and cultural standards in a mass society being inundated by "*kitsch*." Some radicals saw the awesome rise of totalitarianism as an expression of an unexpected "working-class authoritarianism."† Others blamed the people themselves, and not the conservative institutions which had regained dominance in the society, for the failure of radical hopes. Much of the disillusionment of the 50's with the working class can be summed up in two statements, which later served as the basis for the "radicalism" of the 1960's:

1) The general public is hypnotized by affluence and commercialism and has been reduced to a mass of private consumers.

2) In the atmosphere this creates, people are easily manipulated and the leaders of various interest groups tend to congeal into a uniformly venal though clever elite.

These two axioms were most clearly argued in the work of a radical sociologist who achieved great influence in the 1950's and early 1960's—the late C. Wright Mills. Paradoxically, those who held these views took over arguments that earlier had been the property of conservatives of an aristocratic bent. The contention that material affluence is destructive of the common man's character was also the view of the Russian landowner who worried that his serfs would lose their souls in a more modern social order, and of the Southern planter who was protecting his happy-go-lucky slaves from Yankee liberalism and commercialism. The same holds for the notion that all interest groups—in the authentic liberal view, the bases for a pluralist democracy—are really hustles which give only the illusion of power to those who support them, while elevating their leaders to an undeserved status. In some ways, Mills's idea of the power elite reminds one of the sour sentiments of Henry Adams, who looked on

* Nor were workers and the poor spared. Yet unlike many who concluded that unionism no longer had a significant role to play in society, the workers tended to accept the labor movement as one of the providers of the new affluence. While they moved away from the spirit of the 1930's, they never transferred their allegiance from unions to government or corporations. It is this which distinguished them from many other social groups.

† In searching for the roots of totalitarianism in the working class, these intellectuals overlooked a more promising field for study. In the 1960's many of the sociologists who had been apprehensively eying the working class for signs of a populist anti-intellectualism found themselves being driven out of their classrooms by some of their own graduate students. The degradation of cultural standards reached its nadir in "pop" art and other cults of the semi-intellectuals. The Hell's Angels never got far until they were "discovered" by Ken Kesey and his clique of college drop-outs. Of course workers can be drawn into anti-democratic movements—and have been. But the impulse for such movements usually originates elsewhere.

the emerging democracy of his times as representing "hungry packs of wolves and hounds, whose lives depend on snatching the carrion," and who dreamed of the bygone day when all public matters had been settled among gentlemen. Such sentiments still thrive in many liberal minds. One finds all the mock patrician clichés repeated by Professor Charles Reich ("New York private school, Ivy league college, Yale Law School"), who conjures up a vision of the American people "in their sullen boredom, their unchanging routines, their minds closed to new ideas and feelings, their bodies slumped in front of television to watch the ball game Sunday." How far is this, really, from the scorn of Alexander Hamilton: "Your people, sir, is a great beast"?

It is not surprising that the trade-union movement came to be a prime target for the contempt of many intellectuals who were caught up in this peculiar mood. Through legislation and collective bargaining it does more than any other institution to bring some democratization to American affluence, thus spreading "corruption" to the lower orders. It is also the largest and strongest independent popular organization in this society. By electing leaders out of its own ranks, it has created a center of power and political expression which is free of both the business and intellectual elites. The forthright and down-to-earth manner of some of these leaders—George Meany, for example—is a special irritation to a certain breed of intellectual. And, one should add, to quite a few businessmen as well.

THE NATURAL ASCENDANCY of elitist attitudes in the intellectual community during the 1950's was given an additional lift by developments in the American Communist movement. During the 30's and 40's the Communists had become a very powerful force in American intellectual life, and had been the leading spokesmen for a pro-labor outlook (to be sure, their own dogmatic version) in the intellectual world. Those intellectuals who after the war rejected Communism as a totalitarian movement frequently rejected the pro-labor ideology of the party as well, without making a distinction between the rhetoric used by the Communists and those aspects of the Marxian tradition which still had to be taken seriously. At the same time, ironically, the Communists themselves were backing away from their earlier enthusiasm for labor.

At the end of the war the Communists were driven from the very considerable influence they had established in the CIO. This is often ascribed to the influence of McCarthyism, yet their decline was well under way long before Senator McCarthy achieved any prominence. Nor was their defeat accomplished by unfair methods. Because of the great confusion about this matter, especially among younger people who have been

influenced by the New Left, it deserves some special attention.

The first important breakthrough in the long anti-Communist struggle in the CIO was the election of Walter Reuther to the presidency of the UAW in 1946. (The faction which Reuther defeated had held the union leadership largely through the support of the Communists, although its leader, R. J. Thomas, was, if anything, more conservative than Reuther.) The Reuther campaign was remarkably clean and democratic: Reuther won his majority during a long convention in which elected delegates, after hearing both sides out in dramatic caucus sessions, voted their choices. Reuther did not need to stir up fears about the dangers of Communism—union members frequently had enough direct experience to form their own opinions. The Communists' allegiance to Soviet foreign policy had led them to adopt positions on trade-union issues which outraged even the most ideologically indifferent rank-and-filers. They urged workers to accept no-strike pledges in union contracts in order to obtain dubious advances in war production which, their logic went, would relieve some of the pressure on the Soviet Union. They called for the return of piecework and incentive pay in the defense plants. These measures, when adopted, were frequently exploited by the management—often to increase not war production but war profits and to weaken unions. The decisive point in the factional struggle in the CIO came at its 1947 convention. The Communists had bitterly opposed the Marshall Plan for Europe, and had nearly defeated Truman, the Democratic candidate, by running Henry Wallace against him. It was only such transparently illiberal, cold-war maneuvers that finally drove the CIO to a total break with the Communist party.

But the defeat of the Communists in the labor movement contributed significantly to the anti-labor mood of the 50's. While the Communists may have continued to use proletarian rhetoric in official pronouncements, they opposed and denounced the real labor movement—the AFL and the CIO—on many important issues. The complexities of this position were lost on the considerable number of intellectuals with whom the Communists retained some influence. For most of these people, it has been enough to be anti-labor . . . period. It blends easily with their natural inclination toward a new status based largely on a *modus vivendi* with the universities, the foundations, and the corporations.

II

IF THE preceding explains why the intellectuals for their own reasons were being drawn away from labor, what has been the state of the labor movement itself during the past two decades? All things considered, it seems fair

to say that labor is somewhat to the Left of where it was in the 1930's. At least, it has moved to the Left in most important substantive matters, if not in such things as rhetoric and strike tactics.

While there may be fewer union leaders today who make flamboyant speeches against the bosses, the mainstream of the labor movement is more involved with social issues of broad public concern, with political action, with race relations, with experimental forms of collective bargaining, with organizing new sectors of the work force, and with labor education than it has ever been before. To illustrate this perhaps provocative point, it is worth examining some of the criticisms one often hears from those who charge that labor has gone stale or conservative.

UNTIL quite recently it was widely believed that unions were dying. Their alleged lack of dynamism and the vast changes in industrial technology were said to be making it difficult for them to keep their old members or to recruit new ones. But union membership has actually held up remarkably well over the past two decades. As might be guessed, the membership of unions in absolute numbers has grown considerably since the 1930's—it now stands at about eighteen-and-a-half million. But, more impressively, unions now embrace roughly the same percentage of the total work force that is eligible for union membership as they did twenty years ago. (Many of those included in the standard estimates by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics of the size of the civilian labor force must be excluded as ineligible for union membership: executives, managers, self-employed businessmen, professionals, farmers, and even part-time workers. This rather substantial correction is not often made by those discussing union-membership figures.) Nat Goldfinger, the AFL-CIO's reputable director of research, estimates that about 35 per cent of the real eligibles are now union members—about the same proportion as in the early 50's.

The fact that the proportion of union members relative to the total work force has remained the same would, of course, be evidence of stagnation, not vigor, were it not for several other important factors. First, during the past twenty years there has been a momentous shift in the nature of the American work force. In 1950 there were a shade more blue-collar than white-collar workers. But today, in addition to an enormous growth in the total work force, the proportion of white-collar workers in the work force has jumped from a little more than one-third of the total to virtually one-half. This enormous shift in the nature of employment has been compounded by a variety of other factors which have affected union membership. Many plants have moved from highly unionized areas—the Northeast and Midwest—to the South and Southwest, where the nature of the work force and the polit-

ical climate make union organizing extremely difficult. Groups have moved into the work force—the blacks and the young—which have little experience with unionism, and are at times susceptible to anti-union threats and appeals. Some industries in which unionism was especially strong—railroading, textiles, the manufacture of electrical appliances—have declined drastically. In the face of all these counter-currents, it should not be surprising that union membership has not soared. In fact, it is no small accomplishment that the unions have been able to hold their membership totals at more or less constant levels. They have had to run simply to stand still.

Another trend of thought, heavily worked by hostile ex-radicals, is that the labor movement has lost its concern for issues affecting the wider society. In fact, however, the very struggles that so thrilled the "Liberal Audience" in the 30's were really waged for quite narrow purposes—union recognition, the right to strike, etc. On this point it is worth quoting two observers of acknowledged impartiality:

Much of the radical ethos surrounding the unions in the depression was supplied by outsiders who joined the movement temporarily, either to help the underdog or to engineer a social revolution. The mainstream of the movement did not depart fundamentally from its traditional goals of winning new members and bargaining for better wages and working conditions. If anything, it was less concerned then than it is now over social and economic issues outside the range of its own immediate interests. . . . In 1936, organized labor contributed the unprecedented sum of \$750,000 for political purposes; in 1968, labor expended what is conservatively estimated to be \$6 to \$7 million to aid Democratic candidates. As for lobbying, union representatives took very little part in working for the passage of the labor and social legislation of the thirties. This record contrasts sharply with the present situation, wherein more than a hundred lobbyists represent labor in Washington and spend large portions of their time on such issues as medicare and civil-rights legislation.*

Some of this new social commitment is remarkably wide-ranging. In 1968-69, for example, the AFL-CIO made financial contributions to such causes as the Smithsonian Institution's Folk Life Program, and the Clergy Economic Education Foundation. It has been estimated that labor raises one-third of all United Fund and Community Chest collections, that union members who are reached through union-sponsored programs make about one-third of all Red Cross blood donations. But, of course, the core of labor's activity outside the industrial-relations sphere is in the field of politics and legislation.

* *Labor and the American Community*, by Derek C. Bok and John T. Dunlop, Simon & Schuster (Clarion), 544 pp., \$3.95.

The importance of the labor movement in winning liberal legislation is badly underestimated. It is very unlikely according to Clarence Mitchell, the NAACP's Washington representative, that any recent federal civil-rights legislation would have passed without the support of labor's lobbyists. The same can fairly be said for almost all the important liberal legislation of the 1950's and 1960's. The defeat of Nixon's Southern nominees to the Supreme Court by the Senate—defeats which were largely due to the efforts of labor lobbyists—is further evidence of labor's legislative potency. Labor does not now simply wait for legislation to appear, and then announce its support or opposition. It takes the initiative in raising issues. The legislative struggle over National Health Insurance, which may well become the crucial issue for the 92nd Congress, will be largely a result of legislative organizing done by the AFL-CIO and the UAW. The unions maintain the largest more-or-less united, experienced staff of legislative representatives which can be rallied behind a liberal bill. And in recent years at least three-quarters of the issues that have occupied labor's legislative energies have had no special benefit for unions or union members; they are simply general social-welfare issues.

The effectiveness of labor's legislative work rests ultimately on the effectiveness of its electoral action. Perhaps it is the growing recognition of this political clout more than anything else that has brought about the new interest in the labor movement. The union mobilization for Humphrey in 1968 astounded a good many liberals who had convinced themselves that labor was a mere husk left over from the days of the New Deal. The 1970 Congressional elections drove the point home: almost every liberal who was reelected could give credit to his union support. In contrast, the liberal and peace-campaign organizations—ADA, or the New Democratic Coalition—barely stood on their own feet.

Labor's political-action program grew up during the 50's—another point which illustrates how mistaken the theory is that the unions deteriorated in those years. While the rest of the country was turning to the Right, even the more conservative unions were forced to turn to liberal politics in self-defense. As Gus Tyler puts it in his excellent study, *The Labor Revolution*, "Republican Senator Taft succeeded [through the Taft-Hartley Act] where Socialist agitator Eugene V. Debs had failed, in turning the craft unions leftward." It is also worth noting that George Meany, who is often taken for a mere "business unionist," was, as Tyler explains, "the moving spirit" behind this turn. Bok and Dunlop report that today labor can field some 500 full-time, paid workers for sustained electoral action, to say nothing of thousands of part-time volunteers. Estimates of the total of labor's financial contributions for political purposes during the 1968

election period are, as mentioned, in the area of seven million dollars. (Both these figures include both AFL-CIO and independent unions.)

The paradox for the Left intellectuals is that this impressive political machinery is becoming more than a passive rewarder of friends and punisher of enemies, in the famous Gompers phrase. It is more and more involved with the processes of liberal political leadership, at a time when some liberal intellectuals have come to believe that such leadership requires nothing less than their own more ample talents and cultivation. While liberal spokesmen like John Kenneth Galbraith have conceded that "every effort must be made to keep the unions in the Democratic party," the unions are not likely to be contented with this alone. They are beginning to expect not only toleration in liberal politics; they want a voice in leadership as well. They have become more involved in intra-party struggles—their early endorsement of Humphrey in the 1968 battle for the Democratic nomination is but one instance of this. And serious contenders for the Democratic Presidential nomination in 1972 would do well to acknowledge them.

III

PERHAPS the strongest charge being leveled against the labor movement today is that it stands as a barrier to Negro advancement. It was put most succinctly by John Doar, the former U.S. Assistant Attorney General who served as president of the New York City Board of Education during the teachers' strike of 1968:

Union concepts of security and seniority were formulated in the period of struggle between company and union. Now the struggle is between Negroes and unions.

The shortcomings of this opinion as a general proposition are easily demonstrated. On legislative matters, the civil-rights and labor forces have almost always stood together in the recent past—not only on civil-rights issues, but on a wide range of social legislation. In politics, the coalition of the labor vote and the black vote has proved to be the most reliable basis of liberal power. But the labor-black alliance is not simply a coalition at the top. It extends to the local levels, and even to the workplace. The most extensive strikes in recent times, the General Electric and General Motors strikes, were strikes of black and white workers against the employer, not against one another. Union organizing drives have brought huge non-white minority memberships into the labor movement in recent years—it is estimated that today one out of every three new union members is black. There are now some two million black union members, making

labor the most integrated of America's major social institutions. In Memphis, Charleston, Atlanta, Delano, and dozens of other places, unions of non-white minority workers have conducted long and bitter strikes against the bosses rather than against established white unions. Mr. Doar's opinion, however, was handed down with regard to the New York City teachers' strike—not the situation in what he might regard as a more provincial city like Memphis. Yet last year in New York, some eight thousand black and Puerto Rican paraprofessionals in the city's school system voted to join a largely white union: it was none other than the United Federation of Teachers.

THE current focus of the controversy about labor and the Negro is the building-trades unions. The skilled trades in the construction industry are a natural target for critics of the labor movement. These unions are labor's elite, at least in terms of the worker's hourly wages, which can be six or seven dollars an hour, and even higher. The unions in this industry generally come from the old AFL, and consequently do not have some of the associations with liberalism that the industrial unions have maintained since the CIO days. Although these unions contribute as heavily to COPE as the industrial unions, their leaders have never been so deeply involved in national politics, where associations with liberals might have been established. (They are, however, very much involved in local politics, where decisions are made regarding work rules, contract awards, licensing, etc. Local politics being what it is, the building-trades unions have often of necessity developed close relationships with some of the old-line politicians who are often the chief enemies of the affluent liberal reformer.) The craft unions generally control the admission of workers into the labor market through the apprenticeship system and job referrals, and consequently can be held more directly responsible for employment inequities than most unions. Finally, there has been an undeniable tradition of exclusiveness in the craft unions ever since they were established. (George Meany once explained that his union, the plumbers, didn't just discriminate against blacks. It discriminated against everybody. The reason—he said—was that even in the early decades of this century there was far too little work for the card-holders to agree to share it with new members.)

Perhaps it should be conceded that the skilled trades have been the most culpable sector of the labor movement so far as job discrimination is concerned. Still, what is really significant about this is the speed and energy with which such discrimination is being eliminated. In 1960 the number of Negroes registered in apprenticeship programs for the skilled crafts stood at a mere 2½ per cent. But by 1968, the proportion had

grown to 8 per cent. And by the first half of 1970, some 11 per cent of the apprentices in these trades were from non-white minority groups—a figure which roughly corresponds to the proportion of non-whites in the general population. The figure should, of course, be higher, given the ultimate standard—the black worker's desperate need of steady employment at decent wages. Most of the craft-union leaders acknowledge this, and are continuing to expand their recruitment programs among non-white minority groups, rather than leveling off at a racial quota.

It should be kept in mind that this progress was achieved under the unions' own leadership—it was not imposed by some government agency. The pioneer work in this field—done by the Joint Apprenticeship Program of the Workers Defense League and the A. Philip Randolph Institute—was begun in the early 1960's, and gained support immediately from the Civil Rights Department of the AFL-CIO. Soon, in good part through the efforts of the labor movement, it received substantial financial backing from the U.S. Department of Labor. This program—together with other "Outreach Programs" modeled after it—is largely responsible for the substantial increase in black employment in the construction industry.

The example of the construction industry is interesting for a second reason: it shows how an anti-labor campaign attacks simultaneously from both the Left and the Right. One of the early economy moves of the Nixon administration was an order to cut back a full 75 per cent of federally-financed construction projects. At the same time that he was blighting employment in construction, Nixon was launching his campaign for the "Philadelphia Plan." This plan, which allows contractors to hire non-union labor, promises less to blacks than many union-supported hiring programs. Many non-white minority workers who do get jobs will only work irregularly, because they will not qualify for union cards. By nice coincidence, the Philadelphia Plan and the crescendo of anti-labor commentary which it provoked appeared not only at the time the administration was carrying out its budget cuts in construction, but also when its Southern strategists were carrying out their most strenuous offensive against some of the civil-rights gains made by the Johnson administration and the Warren Court.

IV

A PART from the issue of race, it is the foreign-policy positions and activities of the AFL-CIO which have attracted the most criticism from intellectuals of the Left. It is worth distinguishing between two kinds of critics of the AFL-CIO's ideas on foreign policy, even though they may share similar views on many specific issues. The first is the radical ideo-

logue, whose approach is based on a sweeping hypothesis about the ultimate—and counterrevolutionary—character of labor's outlook in international affairs. Sidney Lens once held preeminence in this field, but he has recently been displaced by Ronald Radosh, whose *American Labor and United States Foreign Policy** has become a textbook on this subject for some. Radosh, Lens, and others of their ideological stripe have one important failing—their critical brilliance only shines on the Western half of the world. For them the Communist presence on the globe, insofar as there is one at all, is a mere illusion, projected by our ruling powers as a pretext for the maintenance of capitalism, imperialism, war, and associated evils. The second genre of critic holds that workers—and union leaders drawn from their ranks—are simply undereducated in so complex an area as international affairs. Their positions are the result, in a favorite phrase, of *cultural lag*. Their anti-Communism, in particular, springs from an old-fashioned Catholic outlook, the ethnic associations many workers have with countries now under Communist control, a primitive flag-waving patriotism, and an oafish resentment of the cosmopolitan breadth and understanding of their liberal betters.

It is not at all necessary to be a defender of all the AFL-CIO's foreign-policy positions to appreciate the profound misunderstanding at the roots of these assessments. Even those who strongly differ with AFL-CIO policy in, say, Indochina or Latin America, should appreciate its basis in the experience and social values of the labor movement.† It has many profoundly democratic and internationalist elements, and if American liberalism ever emerges from the pall of neo-isolationism currently afflicting it, it will find much in labor's approach with which it can identify and ally.

During the first half of this century the Left looked on the labor movement as inadequate and

undeveloped in the field of foreign affairs. Perhaps with class-consciousness and proper radical instruction, the unions would develop a proletarian internationalism. Yet when the unions did develop an approximation of proletarian internationalism on their own—without, so to speak, benefit of clergy—much of the Left was disappointed.

Neither the AFL nor the CIO played a strong role in international affairs until World War II and after. (Even in the period just before the war, the inclinations of both wings of labor to ally with anti-fascist groups abroad were frustrated by the violent seesawing of the Comintern line.) The most effective instance of labor's intervention in international affairs came during the period of European recovery and the onset of the cold war—when many intellectuals were turning away from a labor movement they said was too parochial. By having kept free of entanglements with the Communists, the AFL was able to help the social-democratic and independent unions of Europe reorganize, despite strong opposition from the Soviets and considerable reluctance on the part of anti-union and anti-socialist elements in the American occupation forces. The CIO soon joined in this effort, although in the first crucial years after the war it was frustrated by its membership in the Communist-dominated World Federation of Trade Unions.

THIS EXPERIENCE left its stamp on the international outlook of the AFL which was carried over beyond the merger with the CIO. It was a desperate, bitter period for European labor. Had the outcome of the struggle been different, and had the Communists gained domination in the unions, European politics would have been a far worse shambles, and the cold war would have been far more threatening. Throughout this period the AFL leaders maintained that the Communists were not legitimate spokesmen for labor: they were the labor agents of undemocratic governments, more like the representatives of company unions than the leaders of a real labor movement.

The same principle is strongly held today by most AFL-CIO leaders. It accounts for the objections the AFL-CIO voices when labor officials from Communist countries assume leadership positions in international organizations like the ILO and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. Without entering into the debate over whether the Federation has been tactically sound in its every application of this principle—a debate which requires a more expert knowledge of each situation than most outside observers can claim—it is hard to understand why the principle itself arouses opposition. Or at least why it should among genuine democrats. (It is quite understandable that even the suggestion of this position should outrage the Communists, for if

* Random House, 463 pp., \$2.45 (paperback).

† Many of labor's critics in the intellectual community saw the split between the UAW and the AFL-CIO as a confirmation of their criticisms of the AFL-CIO's foreign policy. The significance of this, however, has been exaggerated. The UAW and the AFL-CIO have had their differences on international issues, but such differences have generally been contained within the bounds of a commitment to an activist, pro-democratic U.S. foreign policy which both groups have favored. It is likely that their differences over international issues received more attention than they deserved because of the national debate over these issues at the time of the split. The reasons for the rupture are more complex. In any case, the UAW supported Hubert Humphrey in 1968, and has fought vigorously against black separatist and New Left groups within the union. It still works closely with the AFL-CIO on many legislative issues, most recently for a common program for National Health Insurance. All things considered, the UAW is probably closer to the AFL-CIO than to many of the AFL-CIO's critics in the intellectual world. One should not be too surprised if the two move even closer together in the immediate future.

their officials do not represent the proletariat, whom do they represent? To the Communist world, that question is potentially more explosive than a Weatherman loose in an ammunition dump.)

This commitment to a free labor movement also affects the AFL-CIO's views of many right-wing dictatorships with which U.S. government policy frequently makes its peace. The AFL-CIO was among the first to denounce the coup of the Greek colonels. It has consistently attacked the Franco government, most recently for the trials of the Basque nationalists. The AFL opposed the direct U.S. intervention on behalf of discredited pro-French elements in Indochina in 1954, and called for the expropriation of French colonial holdings in the area. It opposed French colonialism in North Africa. It has opposed the destruction of free trade unions by caudillo governments in Latin America.

It is argued, of course, that, principles aside, in practice the AFL-CIO has undermined popular movements, especially in Third-World countries, by lending support to more conservative groups, out of an "obsessive" anti-Communism. Such charges should get serious examination, which they have not yet received, at the hands of a truly independent and fair-minded analyst. The description offered here of AFL-CIO positions on international affairs is not offered as an exhaustive summary of AFL-CIO foreign policy, but merely as evidence that the AFL-CIO does generally follow its principle of support for free labor movements in relation to right-wing countries no less than Communist ones.

Even on Vietnam, the focus of AFL-CIO policy has been its support for the Vietnamese Confederation of Labor, a growing and independent union movement whose strikes, often waged against the Thieu-Ky government, have received scant attention in the American press. While the AFL-CIO has opposed the demands of some in the peace movement that the U.S. withdraw unilaterally from Vietnam, neither has it lent its weight to those who favor a military solution, or to Pentagon proposals for expanded bombing or slower troop withdrawals. Its policy is tied to its commitment to the survival of a free labor movement.

Some of these positions should cast doubt on the contention that the AFL-CIO is an instrument of U.S. foreign policy. The State Depart-

ment has taken far different stands on many of the above matters. To cite one example, throughout the period of official vacillation on the matter of support for Israel following Nixon's election, the AFL-CIO pressed hard for a strong U.S. commitment to Israel and brought Golda Meir to address its 1969 convention. Again, its support for Israel grew out of its long relationship with Israel's large and independent labor movement—the Histadrut.

V

THESE are, of course, many other criticisms of the unions afloat in the intellectual community. The ones discussed here are only the most frequently heard. They are, however, strategically the most important, for if some of the misconceptions concerning labor's approach to race and foreign policy could be cleared up, there would be a far greater likelihood of effective collaboration between labor and the intellectuals in the crucial political hours leading up to 1972.

So long as there is no pro-labor current in American intellectual life, the unions will be hard pressed to meet the complex problems that await them, and to hold their members to liberal politics. The labor constituency is not like the membership of a liberal club; it is a huge raw chunk of American society with more—far more—than its share of decency, but with backward, parochial, and conservative qualities as well. It cannot simply be managed by its staff and officials. It is profoundly affected, for good or ill, by trends in the wider public.

On the other side, unless the intellectuals can establish the right kind of close relationship with the labor movement, they will in all likelihood continue to be torn between the temptations of the affluent status quo and feverish and sterile discontents. But the right kind of relationship will entail more than adding a few "bread and butter planks" to the New Politics program, inviting some labor leaders in for drinks, or securing a few signatures on an ad or manifesto, all in deference to the recognition that labor still has power. Only if there is also a far-reaching rediscovery of the unique qualities and traditions that make the unions important sources for democratic change will the current revival of interest in labor among intellectuals escape the fate of other recent political fads.

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