

## BOOK REVIEWS

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**Robert W. Cherny, William Issel, and Kieran Walsh Taylor, eds., *American Labor and the Cold War: Grassroots Politics and Post War Political Culture*.** New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004. 320 pp. Paper \$23.95

Would the existing powerlessness of American unions be much different had organized labor not been the focus of cold-war repression in the late 1940s and 1950s? How did workers experience the anticommunist upsurge and reshape their political alliances in light of what some have called America's darkest political hour? *American Labor and the Cold War* is a collection of smart and challenging essays that examine the impact of cold war politics on organized labor and the labor-left. The authors explore the historical impact of the cold war and the constraints placed on working class political power in the United States immediately following the Second World War. They argue that the cold war on labor reflected a process that was driven by state-organized repressive measures that were sustained by regional political-cultural traditions and in some cases high levels of working-class conservatism. The essays highlight the efforts of conservative labor leaders to take control of left-led unions, purging Communist Party (CP) activists and their allies and the ways in which communists sought to resist the radical right-wing movement in their unions and surrounding communities.

Well-known scholar of McCarthyism, Ellen Schrecker examines the broad impact of cold-war politics in American unions as the anticommunist crusade swept across the United States. She correctly points out that the emergence of the cold war gave political authority to anticommunist political forces and reflected an "informal network" consolidated with the participation of the Federal government. She argues that the Taft-Hartley Act (1947) was axiomatic for McCarthyism, the overall results of which was the weakening labor's capacity to confront corporate interests and subsequently working class political independence. The purge of CP labor activists signaled the decline of democratic, multiracial unionism, which were strong characteristics of unions where communists and the left were influential. The expulsion of the left from American unions and subsequent rightwing realignment was an essential part of the broader process where the labor movement was depoliticized; organized labor shed its commitment to social change and with it, its power as a broad multiracial class-based social movement.

An essential aspect of the collection illustrates that the cold war was fought in different industries and regions in distinct ways and the attempts of the labor left to survive the rightwing purge drew largely on their ability to redefine their alliances and strategies. Gerald Zahavi's essay, "Uncivil War: An Oral History of Labor, Communism and Community in Schenectady, New York 1944–1954," examines the way in which local and national interests intertwined in the move-

ment to expel the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) Local 301 at General Electric's Schenectady plant. In its heyday the UE represented approximately 30,000 workers at General Electric in Schenectady and their activism drew on a longstanding regional socialist labor heritage with a union structure construed around personal networks developed through years of shop floor activism. Zahavi argues the company's dependence on government contracts helped fuel the anticommunist crusade led by the AFL backed International Union of Electrical, Radio and Machine Employees (IUE) uniting local conservatives and even sectors of the local African American community. An essential aspect of the right-wing campaign was the working alliance between GE's internal security and cold war era law enforcement agencies such as the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) among others. Ultimately, the mounting pressure of the rightwing witch hunt splintered the UE leadership leading important leaders of the union to support to the conservative trade union, consolidating the victory of the IUE.

The question of race and the CP's long-term involvement in anti-racist struggles is an essential and many times complex part of how communists, while battling the onslaught of McCarthyism, continued to struggle for the inclusion of African American workers in the labor movement. In the essay, "The United Packinghouse Workers, Civil Rights and the Communist Party of Chicago," Randi Storch analyzes the significant shift in the union's racial policy, led by Herbert March, a white CP union leader. Since its foundation the union had been a staunch defender of interracial unionism, however, after 1953, the white communists in Chicago began to transfer leadership positions to black trade unionists, in a policy shift that focused on the civil rights of Black workers. This policy shift ultimately divided the UPWA leadership and led to their isolation from important sectors of the union membership, primarily among ethnic white workers. March and his followers fell under strong criticism from the unions ethnic white workers and many of his fellow comrades in the Party as well, who viewed the unions new policy as paternalistic at best. In the end March was forced out of the union under the charge of supporting "white chauvinism."

Throughout the collection of essays we are reminded that the CP's activity went far beyond its day-to-day work in labor unions and how communists creatively developed political alternatives, many of which were the fruit of decades of political activism. In "Negotiating Cold War Politics: The Washington Pension Union and the Labor Left in the 1940s and 1950s," Margret Miller examines how CP activists were influential in the early struggles for welfare reform through the organization of the Washington Pension Union (WPU) a broad political movement that in turn reinforced numerous national and regional progressive causes. Offering insight into the little known world of working-class education, Marvin Gettleman's "The Lost World of United States Labor Education. Curricula at East and West Coast Communist Schools, 1944-1957" explores the rich and diverse labor education programs organized by the Communist Party on the East and West Coast. Gettleman illustrates how the CP-led

labor education schools were more than just ideological training centers. The schools' curricula were diverse and provided working people with access to courses and subjects that went far beyond traditional labor education courses in history, politics, and economics. They also provided instruction of a personal nature, such as the "Beauty and Fashion Clinic," as well as instruction in modern art, the classical music of Beethoven, the works of Shakespeare and popular topics such as "The Mystery Story" taught by the acclaimed novelist Dashiell Hammett. The CP's labor education schools quickly became the victims of cold-war persecution which led to their demise.

The underlying debate that emerges in many of the essays is to what extent did the cold-war period influence labor politics, and moreover, was there any difference between those who spearheaded the anticommunist crusades and those who were driven by fundamental ideological disagreements and seized upon the anticommunist hysteria to advance their own political interests, such as the role of the anticommunist left and the catholic labor activists? In "'A Stern Struggle': Catholic Activism and San Francisco Labor, 1934–1958, William Issel" analyzes the role of catholic labor priests who viewed themselves as battling simultaneously the ills of the free market and the supposed threat of communist influence. In this process they posed themselves as a conciliatory movement placed between extreme political forces. Issel views the catholic labor priests as "responsible anticommunists" driven by deeper moral and ideological commitments. This same discussion reappears in "The Battle for Standard Coil: The United Electrical Workers, the Community Service Organization, and the Catholic Church in Latino East Los Angeles" by Kenneth C. Burt, where the UE challenged the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) in a representation election. In response to the growing influence of the UE and its representation challenge at Standard Coil, the IUE also entered into the fray in a process that converged labor conservatives and the anticommunist left. Only days before the election the UE leadership was publicly subpoenaed to testify before the local HUAC hearing; relying heavily on anticommunist hysteria the IUE defeated the UE by approximately 100 votes. Similarly, in "Mixed Melody, Anticommunism and the Packinghouse Workers in California Agriculture 1954–1961," Don Watson argues that the anticommunist labor purges counted in many moments with the support of liberal trade-unionists who viewed McCarthyism as an opportunity to contain the left-led unions. His account highlights how H. L. Mitchell and Ernesto Galarza, both national leaders of the National Agricultural Workers Union (NAWU), the successor to the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, relied on the diatribe of anticommunism in their attempts to limit the influence of the UPWA and, in the process, further their own interests during early organizing campaigns of California agricultural workers.

Vernon L. Pedersen's argues in his essay "Memories of the Red Decade: HUAC Investigations in Maryland" that anticommunism as such has a much longer and complex existence in American political life that can not be limited to the period of the cold war. He analyzes the effect of the HUAC hearings on organized labor and the Communist Party in Maryland arguing that while the

hearings constrained the ability of communists to continue their activity in the labor movement, they were also weakened by their own internal dissensions. Inasmuch as Maryland's organized labor movement is concerned Pedersen maintains that the impact of the HUAC hearings was negligible and that union membership in Maryland remained strong as the cold war came to end. Even though Pedersen admits that as a result of the HUAC hearings Maryland's unions had "changed their tone," he fails to recognize the long term effect this transformation had on the role of organized labor in politics.

Among the many compelling debates that come to light in *American Labor and the Cold War* one in particular underscores the complexity of the ongoing study of post war politics in American political life. How much of a distinction can be made between those who readily and opportunistically embraced the cold war and the actions of those labor activists who were ideologically opposed to communism? I would argue that the effort in some of the essays to portray the later as "responsible anticommunists," and subsequently lessen their role in the cold war persecution of CP labor activists and the labor left is weak, at best. The fundamental failing of this logic is that it disassociates the actions of catholic labor activists and anticommunist left from the broader political context characterized by persecution of the labor-left during the cold war. Their argument fails to recognize that the political activism of the "responsible anticommunists" was intricately linked to the success of cold war politics, a process which placed them in alliance with the most reactionary sectors of American politics, or if nothing else, as the beneficiaries of cold-war repressive measures.

A good illustration of the problem was the role of catholic labor priest Father John Corridan on the Port of New York, who Issel identifies as a "responsible anticommunist" in his essay. Corridan argued that his campaign to reform the East Coast International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) was a movement equally positioned against the corrupt union leadership and a supposed threat of communist domination of the ILA, a diatribe his nemesis ILA President Joseph Ryan also used to justify his policies of violence and domination against rank and file activists. Corridan, however, while criticizing the notoriously corrupt ILA leadership saw no problem in supporting the AFL orchestrated reform opposition slate led by corrupt union officials such as Teamster leader Dave Beck among others. In this sense Corridan's commitment to fight union corruption is dubious. Moreover, even though the AFL opposition slate posed themselves as the champions of democratic unionism a significant part of their campaign was dedicated to red baiting both the ILA and the ILWU, and their critique of redbaiting only appears when they become victims of the same charge. Corridan supported the creation of the federally-sponsored, employer-financed Bi-State Waterfront Commission which among other activities helped purge communist waterfront activists from the Port of New York. In this sense the political conscientiousness of the "responsible anticommunists" appears to be driven by opportunity rather than a deep-rooted moral stance. There is a popular Brazilian saying that states: "pepper in someone else's eyes is refreshing."

Moreover, Don Watson reminds us in “Mixed Melody” how quickly liberal and catholic labor activists readily embraced cold-war politics and how later on in life some catholic labor activists such as Father Charles Owen Rice of Pittsburgh recognized the implications of their role during the cold-war era purges of the labor movement. In a moment of deep self-criticism Owen stated: “McCarthyism was an era and a malignancy and it had an effect on liberals of a certain type who became ultra-anticommunist; even some, who had been sensible and tolerant, began proclaiming that their anti-communism was as strong as anyone’s . . . It is only a step from regarding the enemy as superhuman to regarding him as unhuman (sic).”

Scholars of labor history, politics, and the cold war will appreciate *American Labor and the Cold War*, the authors remind us not only of how quickly the democratic rights of workers were constrained in the past, but the long-term political effects of cold-war policies against labor, both of which are particularly pertinent in the current political climate when some of the basic democratic rights of Americans appear to be at risk.

William Mello  
Indiana University

**Wendell Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto*.** Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. xii + 333 pp. \$35 cloth; \$20 paper.

Wendell Pritchett challenges popular and scholarly images of the modern ghetto by highlighting Brownsville’s history as a working-class neighborhood. This area of East Brooklyn underwent significant racial change, beginning the twentieth century as a largely white, Jewish neighborhood. Brownsville’s black and Latino populations grew rapidly in the postwar years. Between 1940 and 1970, the population switched from eighty-five percent white to ninety-five percent black and Latino. Throughout these decades, however, this remained a home for New York’s changing working classes. Brownsville residents, generally from the lower tiers of the city’s working class, shared a history of political and economic marginalization. The neighborhood’s later residents faced greater obstacles, as a result of racism, public policy, and economic change. Pritchett’s fine study chronicles these changes and continuities and emphasizes white and black residents’ unending efforts to secure needed resources and power.

The story begins in the late nineteenth century, with Pritchett examining the area’s transformation from a working-class suburb to a crowded city neighborhood. Tenements housed the growing population of Jewish immigrants, many of whom worked in the garment industry. Although gaining a reputation as a rough place, Brownsville became a vibrant neighborhood with a rich religious, commercial, and associational life. Political radicalism and socialism thrived in Brownsville. Drawing on his extensive research, Pritchett conveys the

complexity of social and cultural life in the neighborhood, as well as the difficulties of everyday life that working-class New Yorkers faced.

The 1940s, Pritchett contends, marked Brownsville's optimistic years. Men and women were involved in a number of organizations to improve the neighborhood, including the Brownsville Neighborhood Council, the Brownsville Boys Club, and the local Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The optimism of these years was generated, in part, by these groups' successes in bringing resources and improvements to the neighborhood. Pritchett also sees optimism in the local activists' approach to race relations. The neighborhood's black population was still small but doubled during the forties. Brownsville organizations, led in these years by white liberals and progressives, sought to improve housing, recreation, and other resources both to retain white working-class residents and to serve newer African-American residents. In contrast to the postwar racial violence in Detroit and Chicago over issues such as public housing, Pritchett reveals a complicated dynamic of interracial efforts and segregation. "Brownsville was not an integrated community, but rather two communities resolved to avoid conflict" (83). Pritchett's work demonstrates for historians the need to continue examining particular neighborhoods and cities before writing a synthesis of postwar urban racial change.

During the 1950s, Brownsville's racial composition changed dramatically. Many white residents, who benefitted disproportionately from postwar economic growth and public policies shaping the metropolitan area, moved to better-off neighborhoods and suburbs. Black and Puerto Rican New Yorkers, facing the barriers of racial discrimination and limited economic opportunities, found a home in Brownsville's affordable but declining tenements and its growing stock of public housing. The policies of the city's Housing Authority and urban renewal would reinforce these trends. While many community-wide organizations continued to advocate for white and black residents, the chill of anticommunism, as well as white leaders' blind-spot regarding local racism (especially police brutality), undermined interracial efforts. By the early 1960s, Brownsville was three-fourths black and Latino, public housing had become stigmatized as low-income minority housing, and the area was perceived increasingly as crime-ridden. Synagogues and other white organizations had moved out and were being replaced by black churches and service organizations. Here and elsewhere we need to learn more about Brownsville's Puerto Rican residents and their role in local groups, but Pritchett shines in his discussions of white and black organizational life.

The Beth-El Hospital strike of 1962, led by Hospital Workers Local 1199, represented an apex of interracial organizing and the promise of a Northern civil rights movement. While many Brownsville residents continued to work in the garment industry, the low-paid health care and service fields were important sources of employment. Local 1199's strike, resulting in union recognition and wage gains, was also a training ground for future community leaders and spurred local organizing. This momentum carried into the local War on Poverty. The Brownsville Community Council (BCC), pressing for better schools, sanitation,

and government services, helped to administer the Community Action Program's anti-poverty initiatives locally. While these efforts had limited impact on the area's poorest residents, the BCC helped to empower local black leaders and served as a crucible for ideas about "community control."

Pritchett juxtaposes the 1962 hospital strike and the 1968 teacher's strike, underlining as have other historians the disintegration of the city's liberal coalition (especially between black and Jewish activists). While Pritchett's analysis of this episode in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community is the least textured portion of his book, he effectively interprets the contested meanings of "community control" in this conflict. Black Power had an influence, as did educational reformers' calls for decentralization. But Brownsville activists' and parents' concerns were rooted in a long history of frustration; for years they had tried to improve their children's schools. Declining resources and ineffective integration initiatives led them to seek control. "The goal of residents was to secure greater accountability from local government, not to establish a competing infrastructure"(237). Brownsville activists were discouraged and embittered in the aftermath of this conflict.

Brownsville in the 1970s, often invoked as an icon of urban crisis, marked a low point in the neighborhood's history. Poverty and crime, while not new to the area, were now entrenched. Pritchett counters the "urban underclass" thesis by exploring the ongoing work of Brownsville's activists and organizations. The neighborhood began to rebound by the 1990s, due to local organizing (including the East Brooklyn Congregations' Nehemiah Plan) and shifts in both public policy and the economy. Amidst these changes, Pritchett points to the area's consistent character. "Brownsville continued to serve the same function it had for a century; it was a transitory neighborhood for working-class New Yorkers"(243). Working-class and poor people needed cheap housing.

Pritchett's important study of the "changing face of the ghetto" addresses many issues central to recent urban and African-American history. This social history reminds us of the merits of studying relatively small populations and places. *Brownsville, Brooklyn* pays close attention to the neighborhood's changing working class and to their efforts to make a place in the city. Pritchett shows the inadequacy of static portraits of the "ghetto" (building on the work of Arnold Hirsch, Joe Trotter, and others), by stressing the agency of black and white residents and the impact of public action and policy. At the same time, the continuities of this working-class neighborhood (white and black "ghetto formation"), along with the mounting obstacles of racism and economic inequality, frame the narrative.

Scholars following Pritchett might engage directly the question of class formation, in the context of the city's distinctive industrialization and deindustrialization. How did Brownsville men and women experience work, underemployment, joblessness, and the dynamics of economic change? Pritchett suggests the importance of these experiences by providing glimpses of occupational and employment data. But he focuses on the neighborhood, its institutions, and activism within that space. Joshua Freeman's *Working-Class New York* (2000), a won-

derful complement to *Brownsville, Brooklyn*, offers guidance for such a project. Scholars pursuing this course and others seeking to understand the twentieth-century city will be indebted deeply to Pritchett for his thoughtful, well-written history of Brownsville.

Eric Fure-Slocum  
*St. Olaf College*



# Errata

## International Labor and Working Class History

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On page 183, Peter Linebaugh is incorrectly given La Roche College as an institutional affiliation; his affiliation should read University of Toledo.

On page 193, Manuel Yang is incorrectly given University of Toledo as an institutional affiliation; his affiliation should read La Roche College.

On page 118, in the first line of abstract, “and” should appear between “examines” and “evaluates.”

On page 187, the paragraph beginning “We have rarely seen her equal . . .” and going down to (191) should be a block quote, and the sentence following “And, of course, . . .” should be the last sentence ending the paragraph beginning “His review of Tomlin . . .”