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Victor G. Devinatz
Illinois State University

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REVIEW ARTICLE

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THE UNITED AUTO WORKERS UNION AS AMERICAN VANGUARD, 1935 TO 1970: REALITY OR ILLUSION?*

From 1935 through the early 21st century, the United Auto Workers (UAW) has enjoyed a widespread reputation as a progressive union with an explicitly left-wing politics (Lichtenstein, 1995). Few can dispute the UAW's overtly left-wing nature during the union's first dozen tumultuous years, when assorted left-wing activists, such as the larger and more influential Communists and smaller groups such as the Lovestoneites, Trotskyists, Shachtmanites, and Oehlerites as well as independent socialists (Dollinger and Dollinger, 2000), contributed to a vibrant internal democracy and militancy expressed both at the union hall and on the shop floor. Even in the late 1970s with the UAW's key role in the organizing of the Progressive Alliance (Battista, 1991), various segments of the left lauded the union in attempting to unite labor, environmental and community groups in its pursuit of an explicitly liberal agenda prior to the onset of the Reagan era.

The book reviewed in this essay adopts the position that the UAW, and its long-time leader Walter Reuther, were among the main progenitors of a distinctly American version of social democracy, if not indeed its sole architects. While not denying some of the union's significant collective bargaining victories, obtained from some of the world's largest and most powerful auto manufacturers, combined with its commitment to developing a social democratic polity in the United States, I maintain that Reuther and the UAW

* *American Vanguard: The United Auto Workers During the Reuther Years, 1935–1970*, by John Barnard. Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2004. \$44.95; paper, \$29.95. Pp. 608.

also must be evaluated on other criteria such as the internal regime consciously constructed in pursuit of the union's goals.

I will argue that the UAW does not deserve such an accolade. Although the auto union may have obtained unrivaled wages and benefits — a point however disputed by Freeman (2004, 761) — and while it attained something akin to guaranteed job security for its membership, when one examines the UAW's level of internal democracy, the involvement of rank-and-file workers, combined with the union's positions on racial equality; there were unions that were far superior to the UAW during the Reuther era. One might even contend that anointing any union as "American vanguard" is pointless, given the state of U. S. workers' trade union consciousness and class consciousness in this period. While this viewpoint has merit, to the extent any union can be singled out for a "vanguard" role, there are others that are, arguably, more worthy of this honor.

Given the alternatives in the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations after the 1955 merger, the UAW did look very much like the most uniquely democratic and successful union in the United States, a position celebrated by Barnard. In order to effectively evaluate Barnard's thesis, however, we need to examine the "real existing" alternatives to the UAW, specifically the United Electrical Workers Union (UE)¹ and the Farm Equipment Workers Union (FE).² These two CPUSA-led unions were vastly superior to the UAW with respect to organizational democracy, rank-and-file involvement, contractual patterns, shop-floor activity, and the struggle for racial equality.

One might argue that it is unfair to compare the UAW to these two unions, given that the FE ceased to survive past 1955 and the UE was reduced to a shell of its former self, with a greatly reduced membership. However, in evaluating the auto union's history, it is important to note that the UAW and the Reutherites were instrumental in the FE's destruction (Devinatz, 2008). Moreover, the UE was every bit as democratic and militant an industrial union *before* its expulsion from the CIO in 1949, as it was in the years after.

American Vanguard is a largely sympathetic account of the first 35 years of Reuther and the auto union's history. In the "Acknowledgements," Barnard states that former UAW vice president Irving Bluestone and two former UAW

1 At its zenith in 1947, the UE held collective bargaining rights for 600,000 workers. After the UE left the CIO, by 1956, more than half a decade of raids by the International Union of Electrical Workers, its anticommunist rival, resulted in a decrease in the UE's membership to 75,000. For an excellent history of the UE, see Filippeli and McColloch, 1995.

2 Although there is a relative paucity of research on the FE, good information on the union can be found in Devinatz, 2008 and Gilpin, 1992. In late 1949, the FE joined the UE, formally becoming the FE-UE.

presidents, Leonard Woodcock and Douglas Fraser, encouraged him to undertake this study and that Owen Bieber, the UAW president when his research commenced, provided "an unrestricted grant" (xiii) over the four-year project.

Although the author neither uses any new data sources nor advances any original interpretations concerning specific events in the UAW, the book integrates previously known information to provide the most comprehensive treatment of the union's first 35 years that has appeared in print to date. We should read Barnard to understand the history of the auto union from 1935 to 1970, as told from the Administration Caucus' viewpoint. Although one learns much about the UAW from Barnard, it is far from a *complete* history, because it fails to provide information contrary to the Administration Caucus' ideology.

The volume begins with a discussion of the societal, economic and working conditions inside the factories that confronted auto workers prior to the UAW organizing campaigns in the mid-to-late 1930s, which were encouraged by the passage of the landmark National Labor Relations Act in 1935. Clearly a pivotal event for membership growth in the nascent UAW was the General Motors (GM) Flint sit-down strike of 1936-1937, which Barnard competently covers in a chapter detailing the union's sit-down strikes in the first two years of its existence. Although CPUSA unionists played a key and decisive leadership role in this strike (Keeran, 1980; see 148-185, especially 183-184; Fine, 1969, 221-223), the author is far from objective when he minimizes the Party's involvement in this one sentence: "A segment of the strike's activists and leaders had ties, close or casual, to radical political movements, tendencies or parties, whether Communist, Socialist or independent" (92).

Barnard ably navigates through the turbulent politics of the union's two factions in the late 1930s, providing details on President Homer Martin's Progressive Caucus and the Unity Caucus, composed of Communists and Socialists. He capably discusses the union split in March 1939 between the UAW-AFL and the UAW-CIO and the UAW-CIO's reestablishment in a majority of GM plants after the successful 1939 Tool and Diemakers' Strike. Upon this victory, National Labor Relations Board certification elections were conducted; these resulted in the UAW-CIO obtaining exclusive bargaining rights in most of the other major auto company plants.

Barnard describes the importance of the World War II years for the growth and stabilization of the union with large numbers of African-American and women workers entering the auto workforce. Union democracy remained healthy, with factional politics centering on key issues such as the no-strike pledge and incentive pay. Shop floor democracy also was alive and well, as indicated by the thousands of wildcat strikes held between 1943 and 1945

over wages, job reclassifications, production standards, seniority, job transfer rights, promotions and safety issues.³ Other unauthorized work stoppages, known as "hate strikes," however, occurred when white workers conducted wildcat strikes in response to the occupational upgrading of African-American workers with the most serious taking place at Packard in June 1943.

Upon achieving a razor-thin victory in the 1946 elections and obtaining control of the union's Executive Board in the 1947 vote, Reuther moved quickly to purge the union leadership of Communists and Communist sympathizers. One could plausibly argue that UAW members' withdrawal of support for Communist leadership was due to the CPUSA's backing of the no-strike pledge and incentive pay during World War II to ensure the Soviet Union's continued existence. Perhaps if the Communists had successfully clarified the importance of prosecuting the war against fascism on a world scale and the Soviet Union's survival for the world's progressive forces as representing U. S. workers' general class interest, in contradistinction to their short-term gains, this might not have occurred. This explanation, however, ignores Reuther's vicious, but successful, red-baiting tactics in 1946 and 1947.

With the Communists' defeat, Reuther sought to eliminate smaller left-wing groups from the union, such as the Trotskyists (Dollinger and Dollinger, 2000, 108), in order to obtain absolute control of the rank-and-file. Thus, from 1947 through 1970, Reuther's UAW was tightly controlled by his own Administration Caucus, which discouraged any form of independent rank-and-file activity, as well as any ideas contrary to those of the Reutherites. Furthermore, given the overall balance of class forces, the UAW's ability to objectively advance the working class' position through the attainment of various welfare-state measures depended on the Reutherites' willingness to establish their legitimacy by expelling the left. And Reuther's purge in the UAW set the stage for the expulsion of the 11 CPUSA-led unions from the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1949-1950 and the subsequent AFL-CIO merger.

Clearly what impresses Barnard most concerning Reuther is the "privatized welfare state," to use Nelson Lichtenstein's words, that the auto union leader constructed from 1948 to 1960 for the UAW membership: an array of collective bargaining achievements, which he sought to extend to other unionized and nonunion workers alike. These gains included increased wages, cost-of-living adjustments, paid holidays and vacations, shift differentials, sick pay, medical, dental, and surgical coverage, life insurance, and pensions. In 1955, Reuther's innovative bargaining proposal for a guaran-

3 Glaberman (1980) provides a detailed analysis of the wildcat strikes confronting the UAW during the World War II era.

teed annual wage (GAW) resulted in the pioneering of a "supplemental unemployment benefits" (SUB) program first negotiated at Ford which was subsequently extended to GM, Chrysler and other auto and agricultural implement manufacturers that same year. After a two-month strike at Ford in 1967, SUB pay increased to provide laid-off auto workers with essentially 95% of their take-home pay for as long as 52 weeks, essentially becoming a GAW.

In spite of the collective bargaining achievements obtained by the UAW, were these contracts really as good for the auto workers as Barnard claims? Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (2003) discovered that the UE's local contract provisions were far more "pro-labor" than those of the UAW. For example, 44% of UE contracts did not yield to the demand for management prerogatives while this was true of only 29% for the UAW. Only 6% of UE contracts contained no-strike provisions, compared with 53% for the UAW; 93% of UE contracts versus 48% for the UAW stated that the shop steward must be present during a grievance's first step, while time limits on the grievance procedure were found in 65% of UE contracts compared with 43% for the UAW. The same pattern existed for national-level contracts negotiated by the UE and the UAW (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, 2003, 174).

As Barnard points out, beginning with the 1948 elections, Reuther and the UAW aligned themselves squarely with the Democratic Party's liberal wing. With Kennedy's election in 1960, Reuther became an ardent supporter of the civil rights bill before Congress. Upon Johnson's invitation to submit proposals for his first State of the Union message, Reuther suggested the implementation of various antipoverty programs that would aid disadvantaged Americans, such as increased public assistance, more public housing, job retraining, health care for the aged, educational programs for deprived children and higher levels of social security payments.

Although Reuther was buoyed by Johnson's "Great Society" program, at the same time, he became increasingly disenchanted with the AFL-CIO and its president George Meany, feeling that the federation neither promoted social change nor attempted to organize the vast majority of non-union workers. In 1968, after withdrawing from the AFL-CIO, the UAW established the Alliance for Labor Action (ALA), with the Teamsters Union. Designed to revive the U. S. labor movement, this project is emphasized by Barnard as demonstrating Reuther's vanguard role. In order to inject life into this new labor combination, Reuther offered membership to the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union, and to the UE. Both left-wing unions, however, declined affiliation, still harboring enmity towards Reuther based on his vicious attacks two decades before (Boyle, 1995, 247). Perhaps these two unions could have reinvigorated the struggling Alliance, which had a difficult time gaining sufficient momentum from its start.

Reuther's death in a small plane crash in May 1970 aggravated the problems, but the ALA, a top-down affair, had been besieged from its birth and collapsed in the spring of 1972 (Devinatz, 2006).

Barnard does discuss some of the UAW's limitations under Reuther: the Administration Caucus' control of the union, the treatment of African-American workers, and shop-floor militancy. Since formal democracy still existed in the union, the lack of a democratic spirit and one-party control barely concern Barnard. He does note, however, that while the UAW officially endorsed racial equality, it allowed inequality within the plants and failed to advance African-Americans to union leadership positions. And Barnard refuses to celebrate shop-floor militancy, viewing it instead as a problem continually confronting union leaders. As discussed below, the UE was vastly superior to the UAW with regards to union democracy, while in the fight for racial equality and rank-and-file involvement, the FE consistently outshone the UAW.

Although led at the national level by the CPUSA, a number of major UE locals, particularly those in the Philadelphia district, were controlled by anti-Communists. All kinds of views were regularly expressed at UE conventions where the national leadership was routinely challenged by organized factions. Specific contract demands and collective bargaining strategies emanated from various locals and industry conference boards, rather than being imposed by the national leadership. The union's negotiating committees were elected and tentative contracts were approved through referendums; the same procedure was used for conducting and terminating strikes. Once Reuther achieved power in 1947, he, along with his supporters, passed constitutional amendments that increased executive power and limited "the basic rights and liberties" of members; this move virtually eliminated, and illegitimated, union factional debate (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, 2003, 172-3).

Moreover, Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (2003, 224-225) argue that although the UE leaders favored racial equality, the union failed to make it a priority because it was "already embroiled in a sharp struggle against electrical employers for pay equity and job protection for women."⁴ Nevertheless, while the UAW allowed the presence of segregated locals, most notably Harvester Local 988 in Memphis through 1960, this was not true for the FE, one of the UAW's competitors at Harvester. For example, even prior to the union's certification election victory in July 1947 at the Harvester Louisville plant, FE Local 236 successfully compelled Harvester to eliminate the separate restrooms for African-American and white workers in the main plant. After certification, the local launched the struggle to upgrade all workers

4 Feurer (2006) provides convincing evidence that UE District 8 actively fought for racial justice for African-American workers both on and off of the shop floor especially during the Second World War.

in the factory, irrespective of race, and attained this objective for the first time in Louisville's history ("Negro-White Unity Wins!" 1951, 2).

Whereas the UAW under Reuther advocated "the politics of productivity," the FE endorsed rank-and-file involvement through "the politics of class conflict," arguing that capital and labor had unalterably conflicting interests (Gilpin, 1992, 257, 268). For the FE, the contract represented a truce in the class war, not its termination. Thus, in contrast to the UAW, the FE perceived that a union's strength should be based on a rank-and-file unionism where the collective bargaining agreement would *not* be deemed the "workplace rule of law" (Gilpin, 1992, 252-307; 279 for quotation). This advocacy of a militant shop-floor unionism was articulated in the FE's constant use of both authorized and unauthorized work stoppages throughout most of the union's existence. For example, at Harvester between October 1, 1945 and October 31, 1952, the FE conducted 971 walkouts compared to 185 strikes for the UAW (LMDC, [1953?]).

While the UAW, as did the corruption-ridden Teamsters Union, obtained major collective bargaining gains for its members, a union should not be lauded as a vanguard merely for such achievements. The UE and the FE did as well at the bargaining table, promoted a vibrant shop floor unionism, were more internally democratic and did much more to establish racial equality in the workplace than the auto union. Contra Barnard and Lichtenstein (1995), it is high time that the myth of the UAW being the American vanguard of U. S. labor organizations is laid to rest.

VICTOR G. DEVINATZ

Department of Management and Quantitative Methods
Illinois State University
Normal, Illinois 61790-5580
ugdevin@ilstu.edu

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BOOK REVIEWS

Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism, edited by Jacques Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis. Leiden, Holland: Brill, 2008. \$199.00. Pp. xv, 813.

Is Marxism still of interest or is it now dead — its fate sealed by neoliberalism? The editors of this volume argue that Marxism persists, is productive and has the capacity to adapt to context and cultures (xxi). The book is written from the standpoint of academic commentators who sympathize with Marxism itself.

The volume begins with “preconfigurations” — the context in which contemporary Marxism has developed. It then moves on to “configurations” — looking at the different schools within Marxist theory. It concludes with chapters on key figures.

One of the disappointing features of this otherwise ambitious and (relatively) comprehensive volume is its treatment of the state. Domenico Losurdo is cited as having confronted “the elements of abstract utopia in Marx as regards the state” (62), but it is not clear as to whether this is a reference to the idea that in a classless society the state itself will disappear. Bob Jessop’s analysis of “states, state power and state theory” says nothing about the classic thesis of the withering away of the state — whether it is still valid, and if so, what is needed to give the argument greater theoretical purchase (449). In my view, a distinction needs to be made between the state — an institution that resorts to force to tackle conflicts of interest — and government as a process of negotiation and arbitration. Government is inherent in society but the state is not, and government (or governance as it is sometimes called) relies upon moral pressures, and social and natural constraints to secure order. This type of analysis could make the withering-away thesis far more plausible.

The volume argues that the crisis of the neoliberal order has always been a negative precondition for a revival of Marxism (78) and Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy speak prophetically of the hegemony of finance as a result of the ascendancy of neoliberalism, thus demonstrating the relevance of a Marxist toolkit (100–101). The book involves a critical interrogation of

Analytical Marxism, the Frankfurt School, the later Georg Lukács and the Budapest School, regulation theory and ecological Marxism: the piece on the latter calls for a "new, universalistic humanism" (207) which seems to me absolutely right.

The point ought to be made that the notion of a dialectics of nature — often viewed with suspicion by "Western Marxists" — can only strengthen an ecologically sensitive Marxism. The work of Andre Gunder Frank, Samir Amin, Immanuel Wallerstein and Giovanni Arrighi is evaluated in a piece on capitalism as a world system, while the chapter on liberation theology contains a quote from Dom Helder Camara: "as long as I was asking people to help the poor, I was called a saint. But when I asked: why is there so much poverty? I was treated as a communist" (226). Michael Löwy has fascinating comments on the "theological metaphors" to which Marx resorts in his analysis of capitalism and commodity fetishism (230). Tony Andreani argues that many models of market socialism pertain more to a popular capitalism than to socialism (246). There is commentary on the radical political economists in the USA, the "political Marxism" of Robert Brenner and Ellen Wood, an analysis of the British Marxist historians, and one on postcolonial studies which criticizes much of the literature for simply ignoring Marxist analyses of colonialism and imperialism.

Alex Callinicos refers to gender oppression as a form of non-class domination (85) and the examination of developments in class analysis takes for granted what in my view is a rather narrow and abstract view of class. Should we continue to see class as a factor that exists alongside gender, nationality, "race," etc.? Why not broaden the notion of class so that the form of class struggle always involves gender, ethnicity, nationality, etc. in a way that seems to contradict the class content of such struggles? This view accords well with work on the "new dialectic" that Jim Kincaid looks at, where the tension between phenomenal appearance and hidden relationships is stressed (395).

Callinicos comments on Roy Bhaskar's recent discovery of Eastern religion, "an astonishing turn" for one who built his reputation expounding "critical realism" (584). The volume contains a lively analysis of historical materialism and international relations, and critiques and expositions of Theodor Adorno, Alain Badiou, Louis Althusser, Walter Benjamin, Pierre Bourdieu, and Giles Deleuze, who made the extraordinary comment that "what I most detested was Hegelianism and dialectics" (617). Jacques Derrida is looked at, as is Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson, and Henri Lefebvre. Kozo Uno, a Japanese scholar concerned with *Capital*, receives attention, as do Antonio Gramsci and the varying interpretations of his work. It is disappointing that the editors were unable find anyone to write up the developments of feminist theory and its relationship to Marxism, while it is surely odd that nothing is said about the contribution which this

journal has made to the development of Marxism over the years or the contribution to economic theory of its editor.

We are told that the Institute of Social Research seeks to civilize the power of the state and the market, not abolish it (160), and that Jacques Bidet, one of the editors of the volume, sees it as a utopia that “the market can simply be replaced by organised direction” (9).

But there are two problems here which exemplify much of the commentary in the volume. The first is a curiously uncritical attitude towards the basic institutions that underlie the contemporary world. I have already referred to the state, but we need to view the market itself critically. Of course the market cannot be abolished (as planners in the old Eastern Europe and the USSR seemed to imagine), but it can and must be gradually transcended. By this I mean a long-term process of making social relationships increasingly transparent and exchanges between individuals become more concrete, so that we see real people and the impact on nature when we trade and produce.

Is this utopian? One of the concepts that needs to be critically interrogated — and which is not tackled in this volume — is precisely the concept of utopia. Do we have to accept the classical Marxist dichotomy between science and utopia? Certainly there is a traditional view of utopia as a “perfect” world, which ought to be rejected, but I would argue that the concept of utopia can and should be reconstructed as a moment of change — part of an ongoing process that has no stopping point. Classical Marxism has treated communism too statically and abstractly, so that it becomes easy for opponents of Marx to characterize communism as the “end of history,” a fantasy or utopia in the traditional sense of the term. Behind the often difficult prose of these essays lies an unwillingness to tackle the problems of moving towards greater social emancipation, not as a dramatic, one-off event, but a long term process — the movement of history taking place in front of our very eyes.

But this is an exciting, if rather highly priced, volume.

JOHN HOFFMAN

Department of Politics (Emeritus)
University of Leicester
Leicester LE1 7RH
United Kingdom
j.a.hoffman@ntlworld.com

Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States? by Robin Archer. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007. \$35.00. Pp. 368.

By paraphrasing the title of Werner Sombart’s *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* (1906), Robin Archer, who heads postgraduate political

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