

WORKING-CLASS INTELLECTUALS

In recent debates about union restructuring, some successful organizers, like Bruce Raynor, president of UNITE-HERE, have argued that the United States has too many little labor organizations. According to Raynor, workers won't be able to go on the offensive again, as they did in the 1930s, until existing national unions, numbering about 60, are consolidated into 10 to 15 much larger entities, with less overlapping jurisdiction. Practicing what he preaches, Raynor arranged a 2004 merger of his own union with the hotel workers, headed by John Wilhelm (although the synergies of this marriage have not always been clear and tensions between the two partners persist to this day). In early 2009, UNITE and HERE began public feuding, and possible divorce action, featuring a messy dispute over their shared assets.

The authors of *Singlejack Solidarity* and *Punching Out* spent their entire careers challenging the assumptions implicit in Raynor's glib promotion of greater amalgamation. To Stan Weir and Marty Glaberman, meaningful change can only emerge from below in the labor movement through shop-floor struggles and "worker self-activity"; it can't be engineered from above, no matter how "progressive," dynamic, or smart the people at the top may be. At a time when union modernization efforts have a distinctly technocratic flavor, the rank-and-file perspective of Weir and Glaberman is a welcome antidote to conventional thinking. Nevertheless, *Singlejack Solidarity* editor George Lipsitz worries (in his introduction to Weir's collected works) that contemporary readers may have difficulty discerning what the author's "experiences and observa-

tions can tell us today” since “the nature of waged work in our society has changed so dramatically” since Weir last toiled as a seaman, teamster, longshoreman, house painter, or auto assembler three decades ago. Fortunately for the editors (Lipsitz and Staughton Lynd, who assembled these volumes after the deaths of their respective authors) both Weir and Glaberman have much to say that’s relevant to current debates about racism, working-class consciousness, union structure and functioning, relationships between workers and intellectuals, and the role of the left in labor. Both collections also focus on important topics often neglected now, such as informal work groups, wildcat strikes, and other forms of resistance to factory automation and speed-up.

Glaberman and Weir sharply criticized the labor establishment of their day (which was not so long ago) and job conditions prevalent then, which have improved little since because of declining union power. The many like-minded essays, articles, and reviews in *Singlejack Solidarity* and *Punching Out* are rooted in the authors’ socialist politics, experience as industrial workers, and in Weir’s case, membership in a variety of unions. Read together, their collected works constitute a fierce, persuasive polemic against the panacea of the moment—union consolidation through a series of mega-mergers, at the local and national level. In a workers’ movement top-heavy with bureaucracy and deeply enmeshed in business union practices, both authors believed that bigger was not necessarily better. U.S. labor’s fulltime officials already tend to be far too removed from the day-to-day concerns of their own members and fatally entrapped in legalistic contract grievance procedures. According to Glaberman and Weir, the latter invariably give management the upper hand, particularly when linked to a no-strike clause, which pressures even well-intentioned union reps to become “cops for the boss” in wildcat strike situations. “In the 1930s and 1940s,” Weir writes (in an essay touting the alternative model of Spain’s Coordinadora dockers’ union), “autonomy was taken from locals by the ‘international’ unions with the claim that this would aid the mobilization of all U.S. locals against a common corporate employer. The result has been the opposite.” Too often today, “unionized employers are each free to attack a particular local union without fear that the national leaders will mobilize the other locals or work locations in defense of the attacked.” Says Glaberman, in a 1992 piece, “The Labor Movement Is Not Dead”: “I believe that, if one is not in a middle-class rush to reach the millennium tomorrow, worker resistance—which has never disap-

peared, even in the worst years—will grow and produce the kind of upsurge which helped create the CIO, the IWW, the Knights of Labor, etc.” In the meantime, the authors argue, leftists should be planting the seeds for the next upsurge, not helping to erect what may become new obstacles in its path when the balance of workplace power starts to shift again in labor’s favor.

Both Glaberman and Weir advocate forms of organization like the anarcho-sindicalist Coordinadora or the workers’ councils of the short-lived 1956 Hungarian Revolution. They believe these models are less susceptible to bureaucratization and co-optation. Militant, member-controlled, job-based structures would enable workers to network laterally, on a nationwide and international basis, without interference from union hierarchies bent on dysfunctional domination of their local affiliates. According to Glaberman and Weir, the marginality of Marxists within U.S. unions is due, in part, to their own top-down style and “party line” mentality, a *modus operandi* antithetical to creative interaction between labor and the left. As Weir writes in “The Vanguard Party: An Institution Whose Time Has Expired”:

More than half a century has passed since any grouping of American radicals was a source of imaginative ideas and dialogue among indigenous working-class intellectuals. With few exceptions, radical political sects are elitist. . . . Their methodology is symptomatic of this fact. They believe that they have something to bring to workers, but not the other way around . . .

Weir himself was a genuine working-class intellectual—a rebellious college dropout from a blue-collar family in East Los Angeles. Glaberman was, in contrast, a “colonizer,” an intellectual who left graduate study at Columbia to become a machinist and assembly-line worker in Detroit. Their personal and political trajectories were otherwise quite similar, although, as Lynd observes, it is “curious and sad that they did not themselves make common cause” after departing (via different routes) from the same Trotskyist “vanguard,” the Workers Party (WP). Weir was recruited into the WP during World War II, while serving, due to his antiwar convictions, in the merchant marine. An offshoot of the Socialist Workers Party, the WP counted among its leading lights the noted Trinidadian Marxist and Pan-Africanist, C. L. R. James, a beloved comrade profiled in both *Punching Out* and *Singlejack Solidarity*. Many WP activists (includ-

ing Glaberman) got jobs in the auto industry, where, as Weir reports, they “played a prominent role in the formation of the Rank and File Caucus, which didn’t have one prominent official leader in it.” Nevertheless, in 1945, this dissident group pressured the UAW into holding a nationwide referendum on whether to continue its wartime no-strike pledge. Forty percent of those voting opposed the controversial ban in an expression of sympathy for wildcatting that Glaberman says was even deeper on the shop floor in Detroit. There, a majority of UAW members defied both the government and their own union by walking out in hundreds of local disputes between 1941 and ’45, a subject explored more extensively in Glaberman’s 1980 book, *Wartime Strikes*.

Both Glaberman and Weir remained rank-and-file activists until the 1960s. Glaberman then went back to school, earned a Ph.D., and taught at Wayne State, where he met and influenced part-time students who worked in auto plants and belonged to the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. The author of *Punching Out* also ran a small publishing house, Bewick Editions, to distribute his own work and theoretical writing by C. L. R. James. Meanwhile, Weir made himself a major thorn in the side of ILWU president Harry Bridges, by organizing support for a seventeen-year lawsuit challenging union complicity in job-cutting containerization deals on the West Coast docks. Fired as a longshoreman in 1963, he retooled as a labor educator as well, teaching classes for workers and shop stewards at the University of Illinois. In the mid-1980s, Weir co-founded Singlejack Press in California, a publishing house devoted to “writings about work by the people who do it.” Like Glaberman in Detroit, Weir was—according to labor journalist and author Kim Moody—a “mentor to many of us from the student movement of the 1960s” because he “brought a world of experience we could hardly have found elsewhere.”

That experience makes for fascinating, if sometimes duplicative, reading in *Singlejack Solidarity*. Weir’s collection ranges widely and includes analyses of the general strikes in San Francisco in 1934 and Oakland in 1946; the shipboard culture of work and solidarity in the Sailors Union of the Pacific (SUP); the introduction of automation in longshoring, coal mining, and other industries in the 1950s; and the development of a decade-long “labor revolt” against bad working conditions, unpopular contracts, and undemocratic union practices that began in the mid-1960s. As Weir points out in “Luddism Today,” the labor unrest thirty-five years ago involved “the largest single wave of

absenteeism, tardiness, and minor acts of sabotage ever experienced by American industry.” This trend reflected:

a new radical mood developing across the working class. New values were replacing old ones, a process accelerated as large numbers of young workers entered the labor force. The primary stated goal of the revolts was the improvement of working conditions. The slogan that swelled out of the auto plants in the mid-1960s—“humanize working conditions”—was not so much a call to obtain clean toilets, lunchrooms, and work areas as it was a signal that workers needed a voice in decision making about production in order to survive.

In such commentaries both Weir and Glaberman reject the usual distinctions between “business unionism” and “social unionism” (or, as the latter is known today, “social movement unionism.”) Glaberman reminds us that, in the post-war era, “the classic figure of social unionism was Walter Reuther,” his longtime national union president. The essence of UAW’s “social contract” in auto was “the trade-off of discipline over production for financial and other benefits outside of production.” As *Punching Out* notes, Reuther had

plans at the beginning of World War II for the conversion of the automobile industry; plans at the end of the war for converting war plants to the production of housing; demands in the GM strike of 1945–46 for wage increases without price increases, opening the corporations’ books; and, later on, such things as pensions, health insurance, COLA, SUB pay, etc.

Nevertheless, while the UAW founder was, for two decades, “paying lip service to social causes” and promoting “heavy involvement in Democratic politics,” autoworkers faced steady “erosion of rights on the job and democracy within the union.” During Reuther’s widely acclaimed reign, the UAW became, according to Glaberman, “a one-party dictatorship and the totally bureaucratized institution that it is today.”

Thus neither Glaberman nor Weir would have been fans of top-down reformers now. Both authors would have viewed them as Reuther’s ideological heirs, union centralizers trying to consolidate power in their own hands for the greater good of dues-paying members who lack the “progressive politics” and “larger vision” of the labor officialdom. Nobody, living or dead, does a better job puncturing such self-serving rationales for

autocratic rule, while also not romanticizing the rank and file (among whom Glaberman and Weir spent many years). Weir's death at eighty in 2001 and Glaberman's at eighty-three later that same year deprived the labor left of two important, if often contrarian, voices. We need more, not less, of their kind of thinking about the centrality of the workplace, the importance of rank-and-file power, and the potential of ordinary people to transform themselves and their organizations through the experience of labor solidarity and struggle.

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