

State of the Union: A Century of American Labor. *By Nelson Lichtenstein*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. 298 pp. Photographs, notes, index. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN 0-691-05768-0.

Reviewed by Kevin Boyle

In more than twenty years of extraordinarily insightful scholarship, Nelson Lichtenstein has done more than almost any other historian to shape the profession's understanding of the mid-twentieth-century American labor movement. With *State of the Union*, he fashions a powerful and complex narrative of the movement's struggles from the glory days of the New Deal to the present. The book is at once a scholarly synthesis and a *cri de couer* for the union ideal.

Much of Lichtenstein's story follows a path he has hewed over the past two decades. In the 1930s, he argues, a surging labor movement laid the basis for a genuine industrial democracy that would advance workers' rights at the point of production and would grant unionists a formal role in corporate decision-making. The national swing to the right in the 1940s brought labor's forward march to a crashing halt. Their broader goals suddenly beyond the pale, labor unions settled into a truncated collective-bargaining regime. Unions won their members higher wages and generous fringe benefits, but they lost the ability to secure such gains for the working class as a whole. At the same time, labor accepted a highly legalistic grievance process that discouraged the sort of shop-floor activism that had built the labor movement during the Great Depression. Those weaknesses left organized labor wholly unprepared for the antiunion onslaught corporations and their political allies mounted in the 1980s.

Even as he follows the familiar story, however, Lichtenstein changes it in some important ways. In his earlier work, Lichtenstein blamed unions' postwar retreat largely on labor leaders themselves, arguing that they limited their organization's goals in response to political pressure. Now he argues that major unions, such as the United Automobile Workers, continued to promote social democratic agendas throughout the 1950s and 1960s. But massive roadblocks stymied their efforts. Conservative politicians—led by the Democrats' southern wing—undercut even the mildest reform

initiatives. Corporations blocked any attempt to extend the frontiers of collective bargaining; indeed, Lichtenstein now wonders whether there ever was a postwar “labor–management accord,” a mainstay of his earlier work.

But Lichtenstein does not blame the right alone for labor’s limits. As unions lost their élan in the 1950s and 1960s, he says, liberals and leftists rejected organized labor as a force for social change and embraced a politics that privileged the protection of civil rights over class-based mobilization. Lichtenstein acknowledges that the rights revolution of the 1960s accomplished great things. He contends, however, that when liberals extended state protection of civil rights to the workplace—a principle embodied in Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act—they undermined the union ideal of collective action in defense of working-class interests. The law divided workers by race, gender, and, gradually, other identities. It encouraged them to combat discrimination through the legal system rather than through their unions. And it provided them no tools for confronting the vast power that capital wielded. So civil rights proved to be a weak substitute for the industrial democracy that animated labor activism in the first half of the twentieth century. If unions are to recover from the devastation of recent decades, Lichtenstein concludes, activists need to “redress the balance” between collective action and rights consciousness.

Some of Lichtenstein’s charges are convincing. Labor historians have been far too willing to condemn organized labor for not being a more progressive force in the postwar era, despite massive evidence that many unions continued to battle for social change long after the 1930s faded into memory. Conversely, historians have been far too slow to recognize the extent to which conservatives set the postwar political agenda. It is refreshing to see Lichtenstein helping to shift the onus for labor’s decline. His argument becomes more problematic, however, when he posits a tension between union rights and civil rights. The transformation from class-based to rights-based liberalism—now the standard interpretation of postwar reform—is too sharply drawn. New Deal policies were rarely universal; they often excluded large numbers of people from coverage because of their race or gender, a most powerful form of identity politics. Even those policies that were collective, moreover, could be employed for less than collective purposes. White workers repeatedly used the protection of the Wagner Act, for example, to rigidify shop-

floor segregation. The antidiscrimination laws of the 1960s, conversely, were not intended to substitute for the workplace organization the Wagner Act made possible. When liberals added Title VII to the Civil Rights Act, they sought to correct injustices that unions could not address, such as discriminatory hiring practices, or would not address, such as discriminatory seniority systems. To be sure, policymakers sometimes extended civil rights in ways that clashed with union rights, affirmative action being the most explosive example. But affirmative action has been sharply curtailed in the last two decades, its scope restricted by the courts, much as employers have restricted union rights. As Lichtenstein points out, antidiscrimination protections have proved far more resistant to attack. But those protections do not run counter to unionization. They reinforce it by preventing the sort of racial and gender injustices that for so long undermined solidarity. Progressives therefore do themselves no favors when they pit class and rights politics against each other. If unions are to have a future—and Lichtenstein argues passionately for their cause—their advocates must see that the pursuit of justice, though it takes many forms, is not divisible.

Kevin Boyle teaches history at Ohio State University. He is the author of The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945–1968 (1995) and editor of Organized Labor and American Politics, 1894–1994: The Labor–Liberal Alliance (1998). He is currently writing “Sweet Justice: A Story of Race, Rights, and Murder in Jazz-Age America.”