

Confronting American Labor: The New Left Dilemma. *By Jeffrey W. Coker.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. xiv + 211 pp. Index, notes, bibliography. Cloth, \$32.50. ISBN 0-826-21420-7.

Reviewed by Kevin Boyle

Sitting on a shelf in my office is an old union button, a memento of my days as a teaching assistant at the University of Michigan in the 1980s. It is a simple design, a vivid yellow background emblazoned with the Graduate Employees Organization's acronym—GEO—and, in smaller letters, the slogan “Workers, Teachers, Scholars.” The slogan was a declaration of solidarity and identity: sure, we were academics-in-training, but we weren't all that different from the auto workers, pipe fitters, and Teamsters who filled the Detroit suburbs twenty miles to the east of the university. However much we enjoyed the swagger it gave us, though, the slogan wasn't really ours; we inherited it from the grad students who had organized Michigan's GEO chapter in the early 1970s. I never gave that fact a second thought years ago, when the button dangled from my backpack instead of gathering dust amid my books. But I couldn't get it out of my mind as I read Jeffrey Coker's *Confronting American Labor*. According to Coker, in the post-World War II era leftist intellectuals abandoned the labor movement, convinced that the working class was not, and never would be, the primary agent of social change. If that were so, why in the world did the students who formed GEO—radicals on the quintessential New Left campus—proudly proclaim themselves workers?

Coker builds his book around case studies of four intellectuals: sociologists Seymour Martin Lipset and C. Wright Mills, social critic Sidney Lens, and historian Herbert Gutman. All four began their careers immersed in a radical politics linked to the labor movement: Lipset and Lens as Trotskyists, Gutman as a Communist, Mills as a vaguely socialist progressive. In the late 1940s and 1950s, however, they became disillusioned with labor's accommodation to corporate power and cold war politics. They responded to the situation in very different ways. In time, Lipset accepted unions' narrow place within the postwar order as a reasonable response to, perhaps even an inevitable consequence of, America's liberal tradition. Mills and Lens gradually abandoned their

labor work and began searching for alternative centers of dissent, quests that transformed Mills into a guiding spirit for the New Left and Lens into its vigorous advocate. Gutman turned to the past, creating a corpus of work so vibrant that it helped to refocus historical scholarship and remake our understanding of American class relations. This fracturing of the Left's perception of labor, Coker concludes, "served as the defining moment for twentieth-century American radicalism" (p. 188), the point at which the Old Left gave way to the New Left.

Coker pays his subjects the compliment of taking their ideas seriously. His prose is clear and economical. And there is no doubt that he has illuminated an important transition in American radical thought. His decision to make his argument solely on the strength of four case studies, however, begs the question of whether his intellectuals are truly representative of the postwar Left. Coker does himself no favors by excluding theorists, such as Irving Howe, Michael Harrington, and Bayard Rustin, who did not sour on the labor movement. And his argument certainly would have benefited from a wider discussion of the postwar intellectual and political milieu within which leftists operated. The critical weakness in Coker's approach, though, is his assumption that one can understand the Left purely by examining its intellectuals. It is a common problem: all too often historians assume that political movements are defined by theorists, in large part because intellectuals do such a wonderful job imposing order on the messy reality of public life. But politics isn't simply a top-down affair, academics writing books that set agendas for others to follow. Ideas have their place. But politics is also defined from the bottom up, in church basements and school auditoriums and union halls and, yes, in college dormitories and graduate-student lounges. To understand the Left's twists and turns, historians need to see the way radicals acted, not simply what they read.

Had Coker ventured into that territory, he might have been forced to tell a more complicated story. As he says, many postwar leftists grew frustrated with a labor movement that seemed too comfortable and at times too complacent. But interest in, and identification with, the worker remained an important part of activism, even at the height of the New Left. Black radicals built the Revolutionary Union Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. White radicals embraced the wildcat strikes of the same period, while a few leftists even abandoned college campuses for the factory floor. And some

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activists actually adopted the union ideal for themselves, printing up bright yellow buttons that, in a few words, say a great deal about the complexity of the postwar left. Undoubtedly the founders of Michigan's GEO chapter had read C. Wright Mills and Herbert Gutman. But when they took up the risky work of building a union, they had ideas of their own.

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