

American Vanguard: The United Auto Workers during the Reuther Years, 1935–1970. By John Barnard. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004. xiv + 607 pp. Index, notes, photographs. Cloth, \$34.95. ISBN: 0-814-32947-0.

Reviewed by Joshua B. Freeman

The United Automobile Workers (UAW) once had a social weight that no union can match today. Boasting an enrollment of million and a half members employed in an industry that was central to the mid-twentieth-century economy, the UAW helped set the pattern for labor relations throughout the manufacturing sector and beyond. The union's long-time president, Walter Reuther, received massive press coverage; he was the favorite unionist of liberals and an important figure in national politics, from the Truman through the Johnson administrations. Deservedly, the UAW has received a great deal of attention from historians, more than any contemporaneous union. John Barnard's history of the UAW has the feel of a summing up, a long but otherwise accessible narrative that incorporates insights from many scholars.

Barnard, a professor emeritus at Oakland University and the author of a previous book on Reuther, displays an easy command of the vast number of sources for writing auto-union history. He makes good use of recent studies, especially Nelson Lichtenstein's *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (1995), but he has also done extensive primary research of his own, both in archival collections and in the many oral histories that have been conducted with auto unionists. For those familiar with the history of the UAW, Barnard does not serve up any surprises or fresh interpretations. Instead, the strength of his book is its comprehensiveness, its clear explanations of complex situations, and its judicious treatment of the topic. For someone seeking detailed knowledge of the UAW from a single volume, Barnard's book is a good choice.

Barnard does not pretend to be nonpartisan. He received a grant from the UAW while writing this account, and he takes for granted that the union was a positive force. While he points out that Reuther failed to carry out much of his proposed agenda, both for the union and for liberal politics, he clearly admires the UAW leader. While he does

not underestimate either the limits of the UAW's achievements or its declining power as the automobile industry itself went into crisis in the 1970s, he has managed to infuse his book with a celebratory air.

Barnard tells the UAW story largely from the point of view of its leaders. He begins with a sketch of the auto industry and its workers in the preunion era, crediting the rank-and-file for the creation of the UAW. But once the union is established, Barnard rarely returns to portraying the lives of autoworkers, on or off the job, and he only occasionally suggests how the changes in their circumstances and outlook impacted the subsequent development of the union. Barnard devotes considerable attention to the factionalism that characterized the UAW in its early years but we get little sense of what it meant—if anything—to the typical autoworker, or even to local union activists. In his institutional focus, Barnard reverts to an older style of labor history that has been supplemented and partially supplanted by more recent scholarly concern with workers' social and cultural history.

Though the UAW represented workers in other sectors, such as the agricultural equipment and aircraft industries, Barnard's main interest is chronicling its evolution within the auto industry, especially in the Michigan plants that accounted for the bulk of vehicle production. He is less interested in the union's activities in factories outside the Midwest, which grew more important later on. Barnard describes the important auto strikes and contract negotiations, and he summarizes the main contract terms both during the years the union won better wages and new benefits in contract after contract and, in his final chapters, during the period when givebacks and concessions became the norm.

More analysis would have made for a more provocative book. The interpretive assumptions encapsulated in Barnard's title remain largely unexamined. Did the period from 1935 to 1970 really constitute "the Reuther Years"? For the first dozen years of the union's existence, they clearly did not, as no leader succeeded in putting his stamp on the feisty, politically sophisticated core group of activists who dominated the union's locals, its conventions, and its caucuses. For the later years, Barnard has more of a case. Reuther, through the creation of a one-party caucus system, succeeded in dominating the union, even as he boasted about the trappings of formal democracy. Less clear is the extent to which he pushed the union in directions it might not have otherwise gone.

Other unions, like the Steelworkers, whose leaders were less articulate, less charismatic, and in some cases less able than Reuther, ended up with similar structures of labor relations and similar, if sometimes less favorable, collective-bargaining agreements.

Was the UAW, then, really an “American vanguard”? Reuther repeatedly issued bold proposals for labor relations, social benefits, government programs, and even industrial restructuring, but few of his plans came to fruition. What Reuther and the UAW did succeed in establishing—for a while brilliantly—was what Nelson Lichtenstein has dubbed a “private welfare state” for autoworkers, which included high wages, health insurance, pensions, supplementary unemployment benefits, and protection against inflation. Yet in most of these areas, other unions, in some cases craft groups affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, preceded the UAW in pioneering benefits. Rather than the social inventiveness often attributed to Reuther, his greatest accomplishment, perhaps, was his lead in forcing some of the nation’s largest corporations to go down a road they did not want to travel.

To the extent that the UAW was ever an “American vanguard,” it clearly is one no longer. Today, the union does not seem to matter very much, except to its own members and their families, their employers, and the communities where the auto industry remains dominant. The globalization of the industry and the rise of new, nonunionized, pacesetter corporations—on one end, high-paid, high-tech firms, and on the other, low-paid mass retailers—have undercut its influence. Compared with even a few years ago, the history Barnard ably chronicles seems very much in the past.

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