

Labor's Time: Shorter Hours, the UAW, and the Struggle for American Unionism. By Jonathan Cutler. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004. xi + 236 pp. Bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$59.50. ISBN: 1-592-13246-4.

Reviewed by Daniel Clark

Jonathan Cutler argues that the decline of organized labor in the United States can be traced to the 1950s, when United Auto Workers (UAW) president Walter Reuther refused to demand a thirty-hour workweek with forty hours' pay. Attempting to locate the "thirty-forty" movement in the context of a militant, syndicalist tradition in American labor, Cutler elevates Reuther to the role of chief corporatist obstructionist, determined to stifle the aspirations of a united working class. The radical potential of the thirty-forty plan, Cutler emphasizes, was that in times of economic retrenchment a call for shorter hours without loss of pay could unite disparate constituencies within labor, unlike traditional exclusionary practices such as race and gender discrimination, or even seniority, which favored those who were hired earliest, usually white men. A successful campaign for a shorter workweek would also guarantee that in prosperous times, workers could realize the elusive goal of material abundance and greater leisure.

Cutler's critical portrayal of Reuther builds on Nelson Lichtenstein's *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (1995), but runs counter to the more nuanced portrayals of the UAW leader in Kevin Boyle's *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945–1968* (1995) and John Barnard's *American Vanguard: The United Auto Workers during the Reuther Years, 1935–1970* (2004). Since studies of the shorter-hours movement tend to focus on the nineteenth century, Cutler breaks new ground with his examination of this theme.

Cutler successfully demonstrates that Reuther indeed opposed the thirty-forty movement throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. Using internal UAW documents, local union publications, the left-wing labor press, and national business

publications like *Fortune* and *Business Week*, Cutler makes a solid case on that narrow issue.

But the narrowness of the book's focus is also its major weakness. Cutler's argument depends on the existence of a united rank-and-file, demanding above all else the thirty-forty plan. He asserts that such unity existed at the mammoth but shrinking Ford Rouge plant, which employed eighty-five thousand workers in 1941 but only twenty-eight thousand by 1958. Cutler's evidence, however, is thin, as he largely infers the desires of the rank-and-file from vote tallies for local union officers. Cutler's best evidence for such support is the thirty- to forty-thousand cards, signed by Local 600 members in 1951 and dropped off at UAW headquarters, which called for negotiations on the thirty-forty issue. It is difficult to evaluate that evidence, however, owing both to the convoluted internal politics at Local 600 and the likelihood of most workers supporting a plan, no matter how infeasible, for less work with the same pay. In addition, Cutler does not explain why the movement did not seem to take root beyond the Rouge and a supportive local in Flint, Michigan.

The core issue of this study that should have been more fully explored was the extent of the UAW's strength in the 1950s. For example, Cutler quotes Reuther in 1955: "I would like that thirty hour week with forty hours pay. I would like to even go them one better. As a matter of fact, I'd like a twenty hour week. But I know damn well we are not going to get it in 1955, and I don't want to make any worker believe that we are even going to try, because we can't" (p. 125). But Cutler's response is dismissive, not analytical: "Reuther's proclamation was hardly a ringing endorsement of the power of the UAW" (p. 125).

The implicit assumption throughout the book is that the union, united, could never be defeated. Yet Cutler does not seriously address the enormous clout that auto companies had in the 1950s, especially when it came to decentralizing operations and automating jobs away. Were General Motors and Ford really open, even for a moment, to the notion of offering their workforces forty hours of pay for thirty hours of work? Did the UAW have even a remote chance of succeeding on this issue? Cutler seems to think so, but to be convincing he needs to buttress his

argument with much more evidence pertaining to the markets for automobiles and labor in the 1950s, particularly during the recessions of 1954 and 1958.

Contrary to the message conveyed in this book, it is by no means clear that any union strategy might have forestalled, let alone reversed, the trends of decentralization and automation. Cutler also wildly overestimates the amount of power held by Walter Reuther and dismisses without analysis Reuther's tactics for combating unemployment. Ironically, the book's argument relies on the "great man" theory of history, which holds that if a better man had been at the helm of the UAW in the 1950s, unions would have thrived and labor would not have reached its current moribund state.

Most of the book is a highly detailed study of Local 600 politics and the ongoing battles between Local 600 leadership, particularly President Carl Stellato, and Reuther. Because Stellato turns out to have been as opportunistic and unreliable on the shorter-workweek issue as Cutler portrays Reuther to have been, it is unclear just who, what, and where the "movement" was. Not even the Communist Party, which had a presence in Local 600 despite McCarthy-era purges, could be counted on to stay in the shorter-workweek camp. There is much to criticize in Reuther's record, but Cutler's one-dimensional approach produces more smoke than light.

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