

The Master of Seventh Avenue: David Dubinsky and the American Labor Movement. By Robert D. Parmet. New York: New York University Press, 2005. xii + 346 pp. Index, notes, photographs. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN: 0-814-76711-7.

Reviewed by Nancy L. Green

David Dubinsky, president from 1932 to 1966 of the then powerful International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), advisor to presidents, and general *makher* (deal maker) in union, New York, national, and even international politics, has, surprisingly, never had a major biography consecrated to him. Unlike Dubinsky's long-time rival, Sidney Hillman, president of the men's-wear Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), masterfully documented by Steven Fraser (*Labor Will Rule*, 1991), until now we have had only union or autobiographical accounts of Dubinsky's life. At least the biographical rivalry is over, now that Robert Parmet has set out to write "an honest and accurate view" of Dubinsky, "independent of union or family authorization or approval" (pp. 1, 3). The rich archives of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, the voluminous literature that the union has spawned, along with an impressive series of interviews conducted by Parmet, make this the definitive, almost daily account of Dubinsky's professional activities.

A secular Jew, whose official biography never fails to mention that he organized his first strike against bakeries, including his father's, in czarist Russia, Dubinsky was a socialist, a Bundist, who spent one and a half years in Russian prisons before escaping, ultimately arriving in the United States in 1911. His anti-czarist socialist origins would become part of Dubinsky's own folklore, repeated throughout his life to prove his social unionist sympathies even as he moved further into the conservative anti-Communist mainstream.

Dubinsky began his U.S. career as an insurgent in the influential cutters' Local 10 of the ILGWU, but he was eventually outflanked on his left. As Dubinsky moved to the center, he became manager of the elite local from 1920 to 1927, and from there he became indispensable to the union and was named president in 1932. As Parmet pithily summarizes it, the union "had been wedded to socialist and anarchist traditions. In the

future, pragmatism would outweigh ideology, but personality would often overwhelm both” (p. 80). The organization would become known (as far away as France, I can add) as “Dubinsky’s union.”

The pages on Dubinsky’s maneuverings to accept the presidency are captivating and indicative of two elements at the heart of Dubinsky’s life: power and politics. Dubinsky threatened to resign more than once to get his way, and much of the story is about purges, fights, acrimonious debates, and contentious votes within the union.

Indeed, it is striking how the history of American unionism is rife with the language of battle. The recurrent “civil wars” in the needle trades do not refer to a class struggle of workers against bosses, but to the battles between left-wingers and right-wingers for control of the union. In the 1920s, the former were Stalinists but also early anti-Stalinist Communists such as Charles S. Zimmerman and Jay Lovestone (who later became anti-Communists pure and simple). The right wing was made up of socialists, who became increasingly conservative. Political differences loomed large between the more conservative cutters and the more radical dressmakers (Local 22). Battles included office break-ins and seizure of treasuries, suspension of officials, and trials of radicals for contravening union rules. Besides internal strife, jurisdictional disputes abounded, between garment workers and knitwear workers, between women’s suitmakers and the men’s-wear union, not to mention gangsterism, discussed intermittently here, which has dogged the industry and the union for decades.

But there is also a language of peace. Dubinsky astutely cooperated with Zimmerman all his life. And one of Dubinsky’s most heroic roles was that of attempted peacekeeper between the AFL and the CIO. He helped create the latter while keeping the ILGWU within the AFL. He then negotiated with both the AFL’s William Green and the CIO’s John L. Lewis, ultimately helping to forge the reunion between the two federations.

One intriguing aspect of Dubinsky’s career, mentioned repeatedly, but meriting greater analysis, is the fact that he collected a series of high offices in the AFL, the CIO, and in the two political parties he helped create and fund (first the American Labor Party and then the Labor Party). Most often he was treasurer, especially of the Jewish Labor Committee, another organization he helped set up. And Dubinsky maintained his

position as secretary-treasurer of the ILGWU throughout almost his entire presidency. The Dubinsky story is thus also a financial history of fund-raising, loans, and donations: within the ILGWU (money passing from the national to the locals and vice versa), among the American unions, within the AFL or the CIO. Dubinsky's web of organizations acted as important fundraisers for causes, ranging from European Jewry to anti-Communism and the ILGWU and AFL's well-known support of the Free Trade Union Committee in Western Europe during the cold war. Dubinsky was a major broker in the allocation of various sums; it is not clear whether there were any internal procedures for deciding which sums went to Jewish charities, to Italian ones (thanks to Luigi Antonini's input), to low-cost housing in New York, or to vocational schools abroad. Through bad times and good, the ILGWU seems never to have run out of worthy causes to help.

When a government commission (the McClellan Committee) finally began looking into union finances (not just the ILGWU's) in 1957, the attack on Dubinsky's integrity, a subsequent fight with the NAACP over civil rights within the union, and, the ultimate affront, a movement to unionize union employees ("over [my] dead body," p. 315), all combined to lead Dubinsky finally to step down in 1966 (p. 324).

Parmet's biography puts the best face on the activities of a fascinating figure, mentioning but never dwelling on his detractors. "Dubinsky had traditionally fought a war on two fronts. On one side were the racketeers, who refused to disappear, and on the other were labor's enemies, who accused him of corruption" (p. 247). The "highly combative and emotional" (p. 32) Dubinsky is a colorful character whose story summarizes an important chapter in the American labor movement. Parmet's book is not a history of garment work or of garment workers but an institutional story of a major union that sticks carefully to its sources and to its man, as "the boy Bundist [became] the middle-aged old guardsman" (p. 125). The story of the now-defunct ILGWU remains as interesting as ever. I daresay it is now the turn of Luigi Antonini and Charles S. Zimmerman to provide still other biographical views from the inside.

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