

*Waves of Opposition: Labor and the Struggle for Democratic Radio.* By *Elizabeth Fones-Wolf*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006. viii + 307 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$60.00; paper, \$25.00. ISBN: cloth, 0-252-03119-9; paper, 0-252-07364-9.

Reviewed by Douglas Craig

Elizabeth Fones-Wolf's superb study of organized labor's struggle for radio airtime between the 1920s and the 1960s significantly expands the history of radio, of twentieth-century labor, and of the struggles that took place between labor and business in the competition for public opinion during those years. Fones-Wolf's research is thorough, and she has adopted an innovative approach, building on the work of Robert McChesney, Vincent Roscigno, and William Danaher in exploring the efforts of labor unions to use and reform radio in the twentieth century.

Drawing on extensive archival research, Fones-Wolf covers considerable ground in *Waves of Opposition*. She begins in the mid-1920s with organized labor's first tentative efforts to use the new medium of radio. Two landmark broadcasters, WCFL (Chicago) and WEVD (New York City), gave labor a radio voice in 1926 and 1927, respectively. During the 1930s, pushed by the organization drives of the CIO, and encouraged by growing confidence in radio's power to change public opinion, labor made concerted attempts to expand its presence on the networks and in local radio programming. In this campaign, organized labor was minimally successful, as its broadcasting was thwarted by the powerful combination of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and well-heeled business groups, such as the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM). This unholy trinity ensured that business spoke with a much louder voice on the radio than labor. Programs such as the "Ford Sunday Evening Hour," a concert music broadcast that featured a ten-minute tirade against the New Deal and labor unions during its intermission, were centerpieces of network radio schedules, while the CIO struggled to be heard at all. The FCC frowned upon special-interest broadcasting and programs; NAB discouraged its member-broadcasters from dealing with "controversial" material; and some stations even banned mention of strikes from their news bulletins. All three groups

were happy to define labor programs as “propaganda” and as “controversial,” while at the same time they welcomed radio programs that mixed light entertainment with heavy-handed political commentary sponsored by corporations and employer groups.

World War II brought a change of atmosphere for labor broadcasters, as the need to shore up national unity and to maximize industrial production finally gave unions leverage with broadcasters and their regulators. The most adamantly antiunion of the radio news commentators, such as Henry J. Taylor and H. V. Kaltenborn, were the subjects of boycotts, and the one-sided NAB code was abolished in 1945. The AFL and the CIO were even allowed a weekly fifteen-minute program on NBC, albeit in a quiet Sunday-afternoon time slot. The FCC also became more assertive in demanding that broadcasters be less hostile to labor broadcasters.

Organized labor found its wartime progress difficult to sustain after 1945. Despite ownership of five stations on the new FM radio spectrum and sponsorship of a series of radio shows, such as “A Liberal Look at the News” and “The Voice of the CIO,” organized labor was stymied by radio broadcasters, advertisers, and regulators, who joined with business lobbyists to limit its ability to advance on the air. The business groups tied their strategy to the antiradicalism and anticommunist movements of the late 1940s and 1950s, and they succeeded in pushing labor once again to the periphery of broadcasting. Strapped for cash in the 1950s, organized labor allowed its radio programs to wither and failed to make any mark on television. “Defeat in this struggle to contest the political culture of business ultimately left unions at a severe disadvantage in shaping postwar society,” Fones-Wolf argues. “Indeed,” she claims, “labor’s virtual disappearance from the media helps explain in part why unions have become so marginalized in contemporary America” (p. 7).

This is a sweeping conclusion, and one that is not completely convincing. Fones-Wolf is clear when she is outlining the political, regulatory, and financial challenges faced by organized labor in its contest with employers for radio time, but she is less so when she tries to untangle the influence of other, less political, factors. She notes, for example, that union radio programs and stations struggled to attract large audiences, but overlooks the fact that all five of the union-owned FM stations had closed by 1952 for want of listeners and sponsors. Although WEVD and WCFL survived into the 1970s,

WCFL had lost its labor programming long before then, making the station's purchase by Amway in 1978 somewhat less ironic than it might first appear. Employer hostility may have made life difficult for labor broadcasters in the postwar years, but small audiences and shrinking budgets undermined their hold on the airwaves even more. Fones-Wolf's conclusion that the stilling of labor's radio voice contributed to the decline of unions in general does not adequately distinguish between cause and effect. However, this distinction is sure to emerge in future explorations of listener preferences and their relation to political culture in the years after 1945. Fones-Wolf has made a good start in this direction, enabling future scholars to continue her project of sorting out the complicated story of labor broadcasting.

*Waves of Opposition* represents an innovative approach to radio, labor, and business history. In tackling the forty-year period stretching from the birth of radio in the 1920s to the definitive emergence of the television age in the 1970s, Fones-Wolf gives the reader a coherent, thought provoking analysis that encompasses 1920s prosperity, the Depression, World War II, and the postwar era. In telling the story of labor on the airwaves, she also reveals a good deal about business groups' media strategies, regulatory influences on programming, and the power of groups like NAB to determine the nature and slant of discussions of public issues. Fones-Wolf ventures further into the analysis of program content than earlier radio historians have done; she does not limit her research to the radio networks but pushes bravely into the relatively unexamined realms of unaffiliated radio stations. *Waves of Opposition* therefore deserves a wide readership, particularly by historians curious to see how Calvin Coolidge's insight that "the business of America is business" played out on radio—the communication marvel of the first half of the twentieth century.

*Douglas Craig is reader in history at the Australian National University. He is author of Fireside Politics: Radio and Political Culture in the United States, 1920–1940 (2000), and is currently writing his third book, a double biography of Newton D. Baker and William Gibbs McAdoo.*