

Labor's Home Front: The American Federation of Labor during World War II. By *Andrew E. Kersten*. New York: New York University Press, 2006. xiii +273 pp. Index, notes, tables, illustrations. Cloth, \$42.00. ISBN: 0-814-748786-8.

Reviewed by Melvyn Dubofsky

Andrew E. Kersten examines a neglected subject in labor history: the story of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) during World War II. Noting that most histories of labor during the war years focus on industrial unions associated with the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO), Kersten builds on the insights of David Brody and Christopher Tomlins, who observed years ago that the AFL grew more rapidly than the CIO. World War II proved a lifesaver for the CIO, but, as Kersten observes, AFL affiliates benefited even more from wartime labor scarcity. His book attempts to explain why this was so.

Unfortunately, Kersten devotes nearly as many pages to the prewar history of the AFL as he does to the organization's experiences during the war. For the prewar years, he relies on scholarly publications, mainly those associated with the "new labor history" that blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s. For the war years, however, Kersten uses a wide variety of public and nongovernmental archival records. Yet he also draws on the large and growing scholarship about government-union relations during World War II.

Kersten emphasizes five aspects of the AFL's wartime history: union relations with federal officials and politicians; union response to the entry of African American workers into the core labor force; union treatment of women workers; the unions' handling of worker-safety issues; and the struggle between AFL and CIO unions for worker loyalty. In the latter four aspects, Kersten finds that prewar AFL traditions proved more powerful than new opportunities for change fostered by wartime exigencies. He asserts that, from the time of its founding and continuing through the war years, the AFL practiced blatant racism and hypermasculinity, showed slight concern for worker safety on the job, and maintained a no-holds-barred competition with CIO unions. Only in its approach to politics and public policy did the AFL undergo fundamental change. Previously committed to an ideology of "voluntarism" which disdained government efforts to regulate working conditions or provide workers with monetary benefits and that discouraged partisan politics, the AFL

became an ardent advocate of Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, joined New Dealers in promoting a program for postwar reconstruction that relied on expansive public intervention in the economy and society, and participated actively in the New Deal–Fair Deal Democratic political coalition. Yet Kersten suggests that because the AFL remained traditional, even reactionary, on matters of race, gender, and job safety, it lost the battle to build a better and more equitable nation. “Unfortunately for American workers,” he claims, “their political reach was not long enough” (p. 226).

Kersten's most valuable contribution is his case studies of wartime racial and gender relations. Chapter three, the most interesting, explores the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, an AFL union with jurisdiction over workers in shipbuilding that, before the war, denied membership to African Americans. When it became an essential war industry that suffered from a labor shortage, shipbuilding witnessed the entry of thousands of African American workers. Kersten examines the response by two locals of the International—one in Portland, Oregon, and the other in Providence, Rhode Island—to the industry's changing labor force. The Portland local adhered to union tradition, at first denying membership to African Americans, then under federal pressure establishing a separate, unequal union category for them, but one that levied full dues. The Providence local, in contrast, welcomed African American shipyard workers equally and battled international union officials who shared the attitudes of Portland's white workers. Kersten describes what happened in the two cities, but his explanation for the different responses by the locals in Portland and Providence is unconvincing.

The AFL's response to the entry of women workers into the wartime labor force (chapter four) resembled that of the Boilermakers to the arrival of African Americans. Unions admitted women, usually as full voting members, yet officials expected women to defer to men, to accept their status as temporary war-emergency workers, and to reenter the home when the war ended. AFL leaders honored the practices of the past, rather than envisioning the possibilities for an egalitarian gender order.

Readers can learn much about the wartime history of the AFL and its unions by reading this book. They can learn even more about two important, yet neglected, AFL functionaries: Joseph Padway, the organization's attorney, and Boris Shiskin, its preeminent research economist.

Kersten may have read widely in the published scholarly literature about labor history between the 1870s and the 1940s, but he doesn't always get the story straight. He is too swift to explain union practices in terms of race and gender. One would hardly know from reading Kersten that the AFL's prewar position on unionizing black and women workers was affected by labor-market structures and employer hiring practices. Where blacks and women competed in the labor market and employers hired indiscriminately, AFL unions organized across racial and gender lines. Where AFL unions monopolized labor markets through closed shops, race and gender were two among numerous reasons that were used to limit the number of union members. Religion, ethnicity, and consanguinity also affected the ability to gain union membership.

Kersten's shaky knowledge of labor history in the prewar years leads to a number of outright errors. He mischaracterizes or misdates an exchange between Samuel Gompers and the socialist Morris Hillquit (p. 13), Representative Howard Smith's investigation of the National Labor Relations Board, and the AFL's proposed amendments to the Wagner Act (p. 31), as well as efforts by several states to revise the Wagner Act (p. 59). Even the incident that precipitated John L. Lewis's punch to the jaw of Big Bill Hutcheson, president of the carpenters' union, finds Kersten relating that famous incident backwards (p. 140).

So do read this book if you want to learn about how AFL unions behaved during the World War II years. Its brief discussion of Great Britain may also help you understand why British workers gained a social welfare state after World War II, while Harry Truman's Fair Deal produced a paler version of the policies of Britain's postwar Labour government.

Melvyn Dubofsky is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of History and Sociology at Binghamton University and the author of numerous books and essays on labor and twentieth-century U.S. history, including We Shall Be All: A History of the IWW, The State and Labor in Modern America, and Hard Work: The Making of Labor History.