

Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II

Joshua B. Freeman. New York: The New Press, 2000. Pp. xv+409.

reviewed by Vernon Mogensen

In his classic inquiry *Why is there no socialism in the United States?* Werner Sombart postulated that differing social, economic, and political conditions prevented European socialism from taking hold in America. Joshua B. Freeman, Associate Professor of History at Queens College, CUNY, rebuts this “American exceptionalism” argument as far as Gotham is concerned in his comprehensive history: *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II*, by arguing that organized labor built a social democratic polity in New York City during the post war era.

In what Freeman calls “New York exceptionalism,” the City government, nudged by its progressive-minded unions, went against the national grain in building a local area network of affordable public housing, access to health care, the expansion of educational opportunities, improved working conditions and benefits, and the fight for civil rights. Lest anyone think that organized labor’s orientation was strictly narrow and materialistic, it also promoted the arts. In sum, organized labor helped to build a social infrastructure that improved the standard of living for union and nonunion members of the Big Apple’s working class. Workers now enjoyed many of the benefits once restricted to the middle and upper classes: homes, cars, vacations, health care, higher education, and pensions. In the process, labor was unwittingly helping to undermine working class solidarity by creating new members of the suburban middle class.

Freeman’s book is a post war history of New York City labor, but it is also a full-fledged history of the city itself, since it is impossible to tell Gotham’s true story without mentioning the many men and women who built the Big Apple and kept it working. Working class culture was intensely visible on the streets of New York in 1945. It still is, especially in the outer boroughs. However, the major media constantly bombard us with public relations images trumpeting the importance of Wall Street brokers, upper East Side elites and bicoastal celebrities while the significance of the working class is often ignored unless their communities are being gentrified. Freeman aptly points out that “[t]oo often, chroniclers of New York see their own kind— writers, artists, businessmen, and politicians— as the creators of the city and its ethos, ignoring the millions of workers and husbands and wives and children of workers who populated it, kept its economy going, and gave it cultural greatness.”

Freeman takes great pains to set the record straight. Close-knit working class communities of catholics, jews, African-Americans, Puerto Ricans and others contributed to building communal cultures that reinforced the importance of class solidarity and unions in the fight with WASP elites for their fair share of the city’s socio-economic pie. Most working class New Yorkers did not own their own homes, they rented. This structure fostered collective politics, in contrast to the suburban American Dream of individual home ownership, which encouraged a more conservative, individualistic, property taxpaying outlook. The post war preservation of rent control is a prime example of how organized labor shaped the social democratic landscape of New York. Imposed in various regions of the country as a wartime measure by the federal government, rent control regulations expired after the war. However, New York City unions took the lead in lobbying to preserve rent control in New York state. They won representation on the rent control board and established “rent clinics” to educate workers about their rights. Without labor’s leadership, many working class families could not, then or now, afford to stay in their apartments or neighborhoods. In a city where most workers did not own cars, organized labor fought against transit fare hikes for many years. Mayor William O’Dwyer’s had to overcome tremendous opposition in order to raise the fare in 1948. The transfer of fare raising authority from the municipal government to the more insulated New York City Transit Authority in 1953 is a testament to labor’s lobbying prowess.

New York's social democracy was not all bread without the roses. In 1942, Mayor La Guardia established the City Center for Music and Drama, a nonprofit institution dedicated to bringing the performing arts to those who could not afford the high prices of the City's elite cultural institutions like the Metropolitan Opera. The Clothing, Garment, and Musicians unions, and the Workmen's Circle, played instrumental roles from the start by contributing a significant amount of its working capital with the purpose of making sure that high quality performances were made accessible to "shirtsleeved audiences." The City Center soon gained a reputation for social innovation. Its opera company, the City Opera, was the first major company of its kind in the United States to present an African American in a leading role. This was in 1945, ten years before the Metropolitan Opera followed suit.

Much of the social democratic impetus in New York came from the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions. The CIO even established its own United Way-like charity in 1943 called the CIO War Chest to provide social welfare services to needy workers. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions took a more conservative, bread and butter approach, and were much more anti-communist in their political outlook. While the CIO was taking an expansive approach to building social democracy in one city, the AFL was more parochial in its approach. Unlike the CIO, it avoided Democratic Party primary fights, preferring to wait and endorse the eventual nominee, nor did it stage mass mobilizations, demonstrations, or voter registration drives. The AFL's interest in public works programs was motivated in large part by its desire to keep its building and construction trades members working. Nevertheless, the two labor federations found common ground in their support for the expansion of social welfare programs and civil rights initiatives.

New York City unions were on a different trajectory than their national counterparts during the post war years. While organized labor's influence on the national stage peaked during the 1930s and 1940s, New York City labor attained its peak of political strength and influence during the administration of Mayor Robert F. Wagner, Jr. (1954-1966). Although union membership dropped sharply around the nation from 1940s to the 1980s, it held steady in New York City. The post war years saw the growth nationwide of male-dominated mass production industries organized by the CIO unions, but the post war pattern in Gotham was a mix of small shops and crafts with many female workers, affiliated with the AFL unions.

Organized labor's power started to ebb in the late 1960s with the hardening of race relations epitomized by the ugly fights between the United Federation of Teachers and community activists in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. The fiscal crisis of the mid-seventies represents the crucible for social democracy in New York City. In an extraordinary example of the private power of investment bankers over the public lives of New Yorkers, the Emergency Financial Control Board forced the municipal government to lay off thousands of workers, and cut back numerous social services that had been won in hard fought battles since World War II. Tuition was imposed at the City University of New York, ending a 129 year tradition of free higher education for the working class, and the federal government initially refused to extend emergency loans to the city, prompting the immortal Daily News headline: "FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD." It almost did, but once again New York unions played an instrumental role in deciding the City's future. At a time when the big private banks were disinvesting themselves of city paper, the municipal unions invested their pension funds in "Big Mac" (Municipal Assistance Corporation) bonds, which provided the foundation necessary to reopen the doors to federal loans and private investment. The City was saved by the unions, but much of the social democratic polity they had build was eviscerated.

It can be argued that Freeman overstates the extent to which a social democratic polity was achieved, and many of New York's minorities were marginalized for too long, but what organized labor accomplished was impressive. Few people are probably aware of the extent of labor's role in making New York a more livable, humane place for working people to live in the post war years. Today this structure of support is being dismantled by those who make the dystopian claim that privatization of public services and compassionate conservatism will provide us with the best of all possible worlds. Anyone who has tried to find livable space in New York at an affordable price, gain access to health care and education, find an open branch library, or faced discrimination, inherently understands the irony in such fatuous claims. For this reason alone, Freeman's book should be read by all New Yorkers, and indeed by all who desire a more compassionate society.

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