

From the Ashes of the Old: American Labor and America's Future

Stanley Aronowitz. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998. Pp. x+246. \$25.00.

reviewed by Vernon Mogensen

Organized labor reached the zenith of its social and political influence during the 1950s and 1960s. Union representation peaked at 35 percent of the work force in 1954 and strikes like the 116-day walkout conducted by the United Steel Workers of America in 1959 could bring production to a virtual halt. The American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations merged in 1955, creating the prospect of an even stronger labor movement, and both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations listened when labor spoke. Today, unions represent less than 14 percent of the work force, strikebreaking is the norm in many labor disputes, and the AFL-CIO is often overlooked or silent during national debates on social policy. What happened to labor? What is to be done?

Part history and part prescription, *From the Ashes of the Old* is Stanley Aronowitz's timely effort to answer these questions. Once a labor organizer, he is now Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the CUNY Graduate School. Aronowitz traces organized labor's problems back to the post-World War II prosperity that lessened corporate resistance to unions, and sapped labor's organizing energy and political edge. As a result, unions were unprepared for the ensuing era of corporate downsizing, the export of manufacturing jobs to low-wage locales, and the attack on the New Deal social compact. Unions also left themselves open to the charge that they had become just another interest group representing predominantly well-paid, white male workers while the economy and its workforce were becoming more diverse. If labor is to revitalize itself and champion the interests of all working Americans, Aronowitz believes that it must organize the South, the working poor, clerical workers, and professionals and managers.

As the most conservative, poor, racially divided, and staunchly "right-to-work" region of the country, the South has long been organized labor's Achilles' heel. Labor's failure to organize the region is due largely to these formidable obstacles. The textile strike of 1934 and Operation Dixie in 1946 were failures of such magnitude that they still shape many Southerner's suspicions of unions today. Consequently, the South still welcomes employers in search of cheap labor and a union-free environment. Another legacy of labor's failure is that the South's conservative political culture continues to exert a disproportionate effect on national politics; consider Bill Clinton and the southern Republicans who run Congress. However, Southern workers have never lacked for either militancy, or the desire to organize— witness the history of the United Mine Workers of America— and Aronowitz rightly points out that the AFL-CIO must rededicate itself to organizing below the Mason-Dixon line.

Labor has played a central role in fighting poverty by raising the living standards of millions of Americans through collective bargaining, the fight for the eight hour day, and the establishment of the social welfare state. Aronowitz argues that the paradox of rising employment in the 1990s is that labor shortages are restricted to high-skilled job categories, but in Chapter 6 he says that there is an oversupply of professionals. And even fast food and service employers have to pay unskilled workers higher hourly wages today as the unemployment rate edges downward. Still, his larger point is valid: the economic boom of the 1990s has not trickled down in any way that might alleviate the structural problems of inequality. The gap between rich and poor, already the widest of any industrialized nation at the start of the decade, has only gotten wider. The real impact of the unraveling of the social safety net is yet to be felt. What social costs will our society incur when, inevitably, the boom ends? Aronowitz recommends a three-prong strategy for labor: it must fight for an increase in the minimum wage, press employers to create more full-time jobs, and organize the working poor.

Aronowitz notes that white-collar workers are ripe for organizing. Like their blue collar counterparts, they face occupational safety and health problems that unions could address as organizing issues. Office workers using video display terminals (VDTs) face an array of problems including repetitive strain illnesses -- such as carpal tunnel syndrome, technostress, and vision problems. Many are women and minorities who are underpaid and subject to arbitrary abuse by management. Public sector clerical workers have proven their desire to organize, yet their private sector peers have long been neglected by unions. Aronowitz is on target here, but it would have been interesting to see him sketch out his thoughts on strategy in greater detail. A decade ago, Long Island labor won a stunning victory by persuading Suffolk County to pass the nation's first law protecting both private and public sector VDT workers.

Although it was overturned by the courts on a legal technicality, the coalition that made it happen could serve as a model for future lobbying campaigns. The AFL-CIO has yet to make a full-scale effort to organize clerical workers and they should be one of its highest priorities.

Knowledge workers, such as professionals and managers, should also be as a prime part of the AFL-CIO's organizing strategy. Aronowitz cites three trends that make organizing them a more likely prospect than in the past: more professionals are becoming salaried employees as the prospect of owning their own practice becomes prohibitive; which in turn has triggered a loss of decisionmaking autonomy as these functions are assumed by supervisors; and the oversupply of professionals gives employers more power over personnel. As contingent work becomes more widespread, unions are organizing teaching adjuncts. Adjuncts at Nassau Community College, for example, formed their own local to represent their interests vis-a-vis full-timers. Organizing knowledge workers is a timely suggestion in light of recent trends in the medical profession. The growing power of HMOs over their salaried doctors has forced increasing numbers of them to join unions to defend their traditional decisionmaking prerogatives. The American Medical Association's recent decision to establish its own union for salaried physicians reflects this new reality. As the definition of who-is-a-worker? evolves, the AFL-CIO needs to coordinate these efforts and find common cause with professional associations.

Aronowitz asserts that organized labor's loyalty to the Democratic Party has not been requited. Clinton's support for NAFTA and his unraveling of the social safety net make it more difficult to distinguish the Democrats from the Republicans. He argues that labor should declare its independence from the Democratic Party and operate more like a social movement. I'm sympathetic to this idea, but here's labor's conundrum. While the independent/third party route may be an attractive alternative in some local elections (here in New York where state election law facilitates third party lines, for example), and provide labor with increased political leverage, the difficulty in breaking through the political barriers to third parties nationwide could weaken labor's political influence. Still, the AFL-CIO should be a more visible and independent voice for working people's issues.

From the Ashes of the Old contains a wealth of useful information and ideas, but too few footnotes for those want to pursue matters in further detail. The inquisitive reader will also be frustrated by the lack of a bibliography. Nevertheless, I highly recommend it to all who seek assistance in putting the New York metropolitan area's labor and political trends in national and global perspective. It is an insightful guide for those who want to take stock of where organized labor's been, the problems it presently faces, and the challenges it will confront in the next century.

Vernon Mogensen is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY. He is the author of Office Politics: Computers, Labor, and the Fight for Safety and Health (Rutgers University Press).

REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW, vol. 2, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 21-22.

© 1999 Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy, Hofstra University.