

[Back to index](#)**Kevin Boyle (Editor) *Organized Labor and American Politics, 1894-1994*****State University of New York Press: New York, 1998**

by

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Since the 1960s, the study of American labor history has flourished as scholars have turned their attention from labor unions to examining the social history of workers. The result of this "new" labor history has been a rich array of local case studies focused on the community, the workplace, ethnicity, social protest, and political radicalism. *Organized Labor and American Politics, 1894-1994* is a collection of nine essays originally presented at a conference in November 1994, in which a number of distinguished scholars use many of the insights of the new labor history to highlight the important role organized labor has played in American politics from the turn of the century to the 1980s. Using both broad synthesis and local case studies, the historians focus their attention on the rise and fall of the alliance between the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and the Democratic Party which lasted from the New Deal of the 1930s to the 1980s.

The book is divided into two sections. The essays in the first section examine labor politics from the turn of the century through the 1930s. Richard Oestreicher begins by examining the historical debates surrounding the rise and fall of the New Deal coalition. According to Oestreicher, class was not a major factor in American politics because the winner takes all system of government meant that labor candidates had to build cross class alliances and stress broader non-class specific policies to maintain their support. Moreover, the working class was divided with racial and ethnic divisions often proving more important than class. The depression of the 1930s, however, broke down some of these divisions and allowed the Democrats to appeal to the demands of working people and let organized labor build an alliance with the Democratic Party.

Robert Asher's essay examines the political views of iron and steel workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This otherwise excellent article, focuses on the views of highly skilled workers and tells us little about the politics of ordinary Americans. Julie Greene examines the efforts of the Democratic Party liberals to attract the labor vote in the Progressive Era. In the 1910s labor lawyer Frank Walsh gave the Democrats an agenda that foreshadowed much of the New Deal program. Reforms such as regulation of working hours became part of Woodrow Wilson's 1916 election platform and gave birth to an alliance between labor and liberals that would reach maturity in the 1930s.

The essays by Peter Rachleff and Bruce Nelson show how radical alternatives to a labor-liberal alliance floundered during the 1930s. Rachleff explores the role the syndicalist influenced Independent Union of All Workers (IUAW) played in the Minnesota Farm-Labor Party (FLP), America's most successful third party in the inter-war period. Under attack from the leadership of the FLP, labor leaders in the AFL and the CIO, and divided internally by political sectarianism, by the end of the decade the IUAW was destroyed and the Farm-Labor party merged with the Minnesota Democratic Party. Bruce Nelson examines the causes of the defeat of a CIO-led labor slate in the 1938 local elections in Detroit. Unlike Rachleff, who celebrates ordinary workers and blames the labor leaders for defeat, Nelson shows that many middle class voters and the CIO's own working class constituency would not support radical politics.

Stephen Amberg opens the second series of essays by outlining the nature of the labor-liberal post-war coalition that lasted for four decades. At the workplace, unions, major employers, and the government built a system of collective bargaining which brought greater job security and higher wages to union members. In national politics, labor leaders were unable to gain public direction of corporations so employers maintained untrammled control over their operations. Amberg contends that labor leaders did not get all they wanted from the alliance but they did obtain valuable gains for union organizations and workers.

The next three essays show the difficulties that organized labor faced when it sought greater reforms. Gilbert Gall looks at "right to work" referenda in 1958 Ohio and 1978 Missouri. By concentrating their campaign in African-American neighborhoods and those outside the union movement, organized labor defeated both referendums by emphasizing the benefits to all workers of the labor-liberal alliance. Kevin Boyle and Gary Fink focus on the relationship between organized labor and the White House. Boyle's essay examines the UAW's attempts to influence social welfare programs in the 1960s. Boyle contends that labor was influential in Lyndon Johnson's White House and that the country as a whole was ready for social democratic reform. However, the Vietnam War drained the government of finances and Johnson's administration was unwilling to undertake whole scale reform. In the final essay Gary Fink examines the death throws of the alliance as the AFL-CIO attempted to revise the Taft-Hartley Act in the late 1970s. In contrast to Boyle, Fink contends that labor failed because it had little influence in the White House and reform was undermined by corporate attack.

Overall this is a stimulating and informative collection that sheds new light on twentieth century American politics. The scholars in the second half of the book, in particular, are sensitive both to the internal and external constraints labor was under and the extent to which labor leaders were, as Kevin Boyle notes in the introduction, the "champions of the forgotten American."(p. 11). However, I would also like to have seen more analysis on the reasons for the drastic decline in union membership and the collapse of the New Deal order. Undoubtedly, the contributors are correct when they essentially blame a white backlash against civil rights for the collapse of the New Deal. However, conservatives also carried out an ideological war against the liberal state and labor unions, which not only centered on race, and which resonated with many working people. Inflation, unemployment, bureaucratically run government agencies, and sectional, bureaucratic unions out of touch with their members and the public, were also factors that weakened the hold of the liberal state on the general public.

Understandably, the implicit tone of many of the essays is to look favorably on the labor-liberal alliance as a period when the disparities between rich and poor were lessened and when labor unions had more power to promote progressive politics. However, without discounting the accomplishments of organized labor, it is also apparent from the essays how little the alliance achieved in terms of reform. Unions confined, at most, to a little over a third of the workforce gained higher wages for their members but little control over company policy. The liberal state provided retirement benefits and minimal welfare provisions, but it also gave inadequate and expensive health care coverage, an unequal and costly system of higher education, and the most minimal of benefits for working families. Collectively, these essays do not offer a very optimistic view of the possibilities for progressive social change and a more equal America.