Nelson Lichtenstein *vs*. Nelson Lichtenstein and the 20th Century Labor Question

Donna KESSELMAN

AS NELSON LICHTENSTEIN WRITES, *State of the Union* explores the relationship between 20th century U.S. unions and the "labor question," i.e., the condition of workers, notably marked by social injustice, industrial strife and dislocation. Why, he asks, did labor stand far closer to the center of the nation's political and moral consciousness than it does today and what role has institutional unionism played here? In other words, why have labor's "larger ambitions" failed?

In this paper, I hope to point out problematic continuities, evolutions and, at times, breaks in Lichtenstein's scholarship as he came to conclusions in *State of the Union*, an impressively synthetic and at once multi-dimensional essay of America's century-long labor experience.

First of all, I'll look more closely at one of *State of the Union*'s [hereafter SOU] main theses, what Lichtenstein himself calls a "revisionist view" of the post-war collective bargaining regime. Then I'll question the use of some political terminology by Lichtenstein, and other U.S. labor historians as well, which apparently covers different conceptual spheres for American and European academics. Finally, these notions will be applied to the 20th century labor experience.

DONNA KESSELMAN EST MAÎTRE DE CONFÉRENCES À L'UNIVERSITÉ PARIS X.

Firm-centered Bargaining vs *Politicized Bargaining*

1. A Revisionist View

Lichtenstein's revisionism lies in his characterization of the postwar collective bargaining model as a "defeat", a dictate "*imposed upon* an all-too reluctant labor movement in an era of its political retreat and internal divisions" [SOU, 2002, 99, in all cases, my emphases]. He thereby takes issue with most observers for whom the so-called postwar "social pact" or "labor-management accord" was the foundation of industrial prosperity during those years, a "metaphor for pluralist democracy itself" [100]. This characterization is not new but a more thorough elaboration of what the author's 1995 biography of Walter Reuther, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* [MDM], already terms "The collective bargaining straight jacket that restricted the social visions and political strategies once advocated by the laborite left."

How did Lichtenstein come to this verdict? First through empirical observation: the idea of a "pact" implying harmonious labor relations was in itself at odds with what few unionists who lived though the stormy period would call a stable or agreeable accord. [SOU, 98-99] More fundamentally, though, what changed from the preceding period was the political frame in which bargaining took place.

Thus, for Lichtenstein, the twentieth century labor question was played out during what he dubs the "crucial fifteen years that stretched from 1933 to 1948" when the collective bargaining regime was essentially determined in a comprehensive political sphere:

> ... a highly politicized system of interclass conflict and accommodation put not just wages and working conditions in play across the negotiating table, but the fate of the New Deal impulse itself. Elections, legislative battles, strikes, organizing campaigns, and labor negotiations were seamlessly interwoven. [SOU, 100]

It is therefore erroneous, says Lichtenstein, to refer to firm-centered bargaining during that time period, for the New Deal had thoroughly "politicized all relations between the union movement, the business community and the state." [SOU, 100-101] In was only in the 1950s and 1960s that collective bargaining had become a fully self-contained system, that unions had "matured" to become part of the establishment. [SOU, 142]

With this analysis Lichtenstein consolidates his view of what he calls politicized bargaining, portraying New Deal relations as a more coherent, interlocking scheme than he has in the past. He thus displaces the focal point of power further away from the workplace itself than in his

important earlier work on industrial democracy. Over time, the two negotiating regimes are in fact increasingly counterpoised: the more postwar firm-centered collective bargaining is described as a "defeat," the more politicized bargaining of the previous period is presented as all-inclusive.

To show the evolution of the author's arguments, let's start with the notion of "defeat." In Lichtenstein's first book, *Labor's War at Home* [LWH, 1982], there is positive continuity rather than conflict between bargaining models: "Building upon the framework established by the National War Labor Board, the big industrial unions settled into a postwar collective-bargaining routine that increased real weekly wages some 50% in the next two decades and greatly expanded their fringe benefit welfare packages[...]" [233]. Likewise, while the regime is "a dictate[...]imposed on an all-too reluctant labor movement" in his recent *State of the Union*, the author's first book described leaders meaning to make the best of things, such as that Walter Reuther, president of the United Automobile Workers Union (UAW) and David J. McDonald, president of the United Steel Workers of America, who hoped to find "a European welfare state in each contract". [LWH, 240]

In his earlier work, then, the diagnoses of postwar bargaining was not so severe, nor, in the previous period, politicized bargaining as inclusive. In their 1993 book *Industrial Democracy* [ID], Nelson Lichtenstein and Howell John Harris placed the decisive stakes of democratic society in the shopfloor. For them, the very specificity of mid-century industrial democracy was its local focus, a "democratic regime" resulting from negotiating wages, hours and working conditions in each workplace; what distinguished this industrial democracy from its Progressive Era or World War I elders was precisely that this conception was not written into a larger vision of social change. Indeed "...the very phrase 'industrial democracy' went into eclipse, replaced by 'collective bargaining' as the singular definition of and means towards, democratic representation in industry."

Though the authors at no time claim to embrace this ideology as their own, notably in the book's pithy introduction, neither do they reframe workplace democracy within a comprehensive system of interdependent relations within the New Deal order. In other words, *State of the Union*'s all-encompassing "politicized bargaining" thesis has yet to mature.

To the contrary, Harris and Lichtenstein set out the ideological confines of contemporary historiography, that which hailed "workers'

power" at the point of production: the very "factory-centered bargaining" (sic) which emerged from workers struggles on the shop-floor [Montgomery, 1979] which raised "frontiers of power in the workplace", [Meyer, 1987] and the "workplace rule of law" [Fraser, 1989]. "Workplace contractualism" was another, less radical, recognition of the same epicenter [Brody, 1993]. Lichtenstein's own piece in the book relates Walter Reuther's pioneering efforts to codify or "constitutionize" labor-management relations through binding grievance arbitration in the 1940 GM Contract. While industrial jurisprudence did advance the union's frontier of control and workers' "citizen rights" in the firm, it was a trade-off for defusing shop-floor conflict and maintaining industrial discipline. In the end, given the inherent imbalance of power, General Motors soon regained the initiative and relegated the institution's democratizing potential [ID 14].

The process took place, of course, within a Wagner Act mandate, but the locus of power was decidedly local. And once again we find not opposition between pre- and postwar historical bargaining models but continuity:

> ...the system of legally established contract-orientated unionism and adversarial collective bargaining that Americans celebrated as the means to, or the realization of, "democracy in industry" between the 1930s and the 1960s may well be [in the 1990s] in terminal crisis [ID, 3].

Lichtenstein's 1995 biography of Walter Reuther, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* takes a step towards a more systemic political construct. Thus, factory contract administration is the application of New Deal political economy at the microsocial level and industrial jurisprudence, the heart of the New Deal industrial relations:

> Although grievance arbitration is not mentioned in the Wagner Act, mechanisms for peacefully resolving the 'labor question', for constitutionalizing and ameliorating shop conflict, were a product of more than half a century of agitation, experimentation and legal reform [...] strong unions and stable industrial relations [were] the key to a Keynesian relation of the economy and the extension of political democracy to the realm of the shop and office. [144]

Finally, in *State of the Union* industrial democracy is blown up into full-fledged political doctrine: "[...] an idea [which] came to stand as a solution to the nation's social and economic ills." At the same time, the New Deal's master plan for workplace democracy is expressed through the words of Senator Wagner: "Industrial tyranny is incompatible with a republican form of government."

Lichtenstein's revisionist view of postwar collective bargaining as a "defeat"—a deliberately strong and provocative term—is a corollary of his New Deal politicized bargaining synthesis. Accordingly, the more pronounced the characterization of the former, the more sweeping and democratic a "victory" is the latter. This hypothesis is a departure from conventional scholarship and also revises, or rather reformulates his own prior historical perspective.

2. Periodization

One gauge of New Deal and labor historiography is the question of periodization. In other words, defining "what" milestones most influenced the labor question is not unrelated to "when" they occurred. Lichtenstein scholarship remains globally coherent with regard to chronology, as we hope to show.

From an albeit somewhat schematic view, two main approaches to periodization prevail regarding New Deal and labor historiography; in both, a given author's appreciation of the "New Deal" is most frequently tinged with that of the CIO. A first group of historians see the game of the New Deal and industrial unionism as having been essentially played out in the 1930s, for better or for worse.

Among them are Sidney Fine, Irving Bernstein, Robert H. Ziegler, and Lizabeth Cohen; they hail both the government regime and industrial unionism as progressive and interacting. For Cohen, Chicago workers declared themselves to be, at one and the same time, trade unionists affiliated to the CIO, supporters of the New Deal and "loyal" to the Democratic Party. In another light, Margaret Weir and Theda Skocpol regard the period from 1936 to 1939 as presenting the first, and the last, hope of seeing a form of social Keynesianism realized in the USA; the unprecedented influence of the workers' unions and program on the Democratic Party policy explains this exceptional opening.

Among the same group from the standpoint of chronology, but less enthusiastic about the state regime, there is David Brody [1993] who accents not change but continuity in unionism: the New Deal did not introduce the great innovations which some would have us believe. More critical scholars present the New Deal as an integrating force of the social movement which doomed progressive prospects of emerging unionism. The jurist Christopher Tomlins'*s* analysis is a subtle one: before the end of the decade New Deal institutions had already revealed they were intended

to canalize the possibilities of the social movement and prioritize needs of production. The school of Corporate Liberal Theory is openly critical of both the New Deal and of industrial unionism, especially its leaders, whose bureaucratic nature was manifest from the start.[1]

The other group of historians, including Lichtenstein, places the New Deal's stakes over the longer term. The governmental experience represented, in itself, a progressive gain, which made the coming of industrial trade unionism easier. The two phenomena evolved, as it were, on an equal footing: the gains of the young trade unions were lost to the extent that the new governmental experiment found itself slowing down; the CIO's progressive character waned in relation to its own transformation into a moderating force of the social movement, roughly corresponding to the advent of the Cold War.

David Montgomery suggests that, while the CIO alliance with the Democratic Party dated back to the 1930s, its crucial aspect was the reactionary turn in this party's foreign policy during the Cold War, thereby calling into question both CIO and New Deal gains. For Mike Davis, industrial union leaders took advantage of the Cold War to increase their own power: in the process they undermined the class-consciousness and organization working people had won during the 1930s which could have influenced the Democratic Party in a progressive direction. More specifically in automobile, Martin Halpern regards the period from 1946 to 1947 as equally decisive, because the victory of the Communist Party supported union tendency in the UAW would have changed the course of American trade unionism in the progressive direction.

By setting the stakes in that "crucial fifteen year" stretch (1933 to 1948) mentioned above, Nelson Lichtenstein in his work finds their place here. The author identifies the pivotal turn of events between 1946 and 1948 when "a powerful re-mobilization of conservative and employers' forces" arose to block the ambitions of the workers' movement. This helped to bring about the "*forced retreat*" of the New Deal, its economic and social, as of the wider political forces which had supported it, notably the progressive wing of the Democratic Party and industrial union leaders who joined to form what was thereafter termed the labor-liberal alliance. In the years after 1948 the industrial unions, particularly the UAW, abdicated "any sustained struggle over the structure of the political economy,"

[1] Among other academics in this group, Stanley Aronowitz, Staughton Lynd...

choosing instead to "privatize the welfare state" through collective bargaining victories. ["From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining", 1989]. Referring to the same period in *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*, Lichtenstein describes the "lurch to the right *after the war*" and its eventual outcome: "The *political impasse drove* American trade unions toward negotiation of their own firm-centered welfare state." (in all cases, my emphasis).

And *State of the Union* enhances the immediate postwar conservative turn in American politics which "*put union militancy* and shop activism under a *cloud,"* defeating labor's "larger ambitions."Among the decisive factors were two exceptionally hostile forces in American life: corporate management generally, and industrial and agricultural white "oligarchs" of the South, in particular. Then came Taft-Hartley, which restrained any serious attempt to project a class-wide political economic strategy ... "the stage was therefore set for the union-management 'accord' that framed industrial relations during the next three decades."

Thus Lichtenstein sets the chronological frame to both politicized bargaining, which preceded the postwar turn, and thefactory-centered collective bargaining regime which would ensue. The substance is that the progressive nature of collective bargaining and industrial unionism depended heavily upon the evolution of the New Deal and its political base: this is synthesized in *State of the Union's* elaboration of "politicized bargaining."

Lichtenstein, in the long run, remains globally true to his own chronological line. But exceptions to the rule also reflect, as we have suggested, the appreciation he has, at any given moment, of the New Deal, the CIO and relations between them. More concretely, this translates in Lichtenstein through increasingly precise formulations of collective bargaining as a comprehensive regime and of its subsequent defeat.

3. Cause and Effect

In the cases mentioned above, external political and social forces are presented as the determining factors in curbing New Deal progressiveness, labor's ambitions and union militancy to the point of "defeat", i.e. the resulting postwar collective bargaining regime. The excerpts in italics in the above-mentioned quotes highlight these cause and effect mechanisms:

— a defeat "*imposed upon* an all-too reluctant labor movement in an era of its political retreat and internal division";

— the "*conservative turn* in American politics after WWII [which] *put union militancy* and shop activism under a cloud";

— "a powerful re-mobilization of conservative and employers' forces" led to a "*forced retreat*";

— "The *political impasse drove* American trade unions toward negotiation [...] of their own firm-centered welfare state... ";

Other factors also contribute to the postwar turn of events.

First among them is the record of the Truman government. The failure of government to interfere in corporate pricing during the 1945-46 General Motors strike and then the collapse of price controls the next summer denoted a defeat for politicized "economic bargaining."It helped result, says Lichtenstein, in the Republican Party's resurgence in that fall's midterm elections.

The Most Dangerous Man In Detroit also provides a micro-explanation, how one key player helped consolidate firm-centered bargaining. While the biographical genre begs, of course, such readings, it is nonetheless difficult to overstate Walter Reuther's influence on organized industrial labor during his times. Lichtenstein writes:

> By 1947, Reuther had become a prisoner of the GM contract. He had held too many bargaining sessions, filed too many grievance appeals... to risk the destruction of the social order with which both sides had made their decade-long accommodation. [MDM, 261-262]

All these factors converge to support Lichtenstein's thesis of the postwar turn. The 1946 midterm elections were the turning point, the return of a Republican majority which placed containment of union power and "privatization" of collective bargaining at the top of its agenda. Lichtenstein therefore refers to "before and after" the 1946 elections: "In the wake of the massive Republican victory of November 1946, Reuther made a rhetorical about-face, now urging 'free labor' and 'free management' to join in solving their problems..." [MDM, 261-262]

Given these electoral results CIO leaders announced they were not going to wait "for perhaps another 10 years until the Social Security laws are amended adequately" and therefore, looked for other negotiating alternatives. [MDM]

While these explanations and factors are not mutually exclusive, and as careful a historian Lichtenstein is when documenting and balancing

social forces, clarification as to how they interrelate, the cause and effect relationship, would give them more argumentative clout. What fundamentally caused the eclipse of what Lichtenstein calls politicized bargaining or, in more general terms, how did workers and unions find themselves on the defensive in the early postwar period?

Regarding the nature of the New Deal, close Lichtenstein readers might also wonder why a number of strong arguments the author has made in the past have not reappeared in *State of the Union*. They tend to be critical of New Deal politics and present a less consensual image of its political base among workers. Consequently, they view politicized bargaining as a less commanding force and firm-centered bargaining more directly rooted in the New Deal period than in *State of the Union*.

Earlier Lichtenstein scholarship thus shed a different light on the 1946's turn of events. The 1946 midterms were a setback for labor-liberal electoralism, but its causes and significance cannot be explained by merely external or conjunctural factors. For if the CIO-Democratic Party alliance and the welfare state had really been a salvaging force for working families, if government policies had been perceived as convincingly progressive, then the widespread worker abstentionism—which is what actually lost these elections for the Democrats—would have meant that workers themselves had been swept up in the "conservative turn", as *State of the Union* seems to imply. If not, what can explain such a brutal turn, a defeat? For at the time, workers were not on the defensive, notes Lichtenstein elsewhere: "American unions certainly had the power and capacity to conduct such politicized bargaining. By 1945, the trade unions stood near their 20th century apogee..." [SOU, 100] And the year 1946 saw unionized workers in movement, it witnessed unprecedented industrial actions, from the winter strike waves to industry-wide general strikes. President Truman had taken a hard line during those strikes, but Democrats running for election, especially those in working class constituencies, continued to run on their New Deal record.

Disaffection from Democrats was in fact not a new phenomenon in 1946. Events and earlier Lichtenstein attest to unprecedented attempts by workers to develop independent political alternatives to the two major parties, to the point of departing from the Democratic Party sphere. Farmer-Labor parties and the popularity of labor party sentiment was already spreading in the late 1930s; in 1937, over 20% polled said they would join a labor party, not to mention vote for one [Lipset, 278]. New

Deal governors of industrial states were thus upbraided for their bloody crackdown of the 1937 Little Steel strikes, including the infamous Republic Steel "Memorial Day Massacre."In 1992 Lichtenstein did not pull any punches when criticizing New Deal Democrats for 1937: "In Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, three states that were central battlegrounds for the CIO organizing campaigns, prominent Democratic politicians [...] turned the power of government against the unions." [*Who Built America*, 416] Widespread working class abstentionism in the 1942 midterms, reflecting dissatisfaction with the war regime, was a wake-up call for CIO leaders who then formed the nation's first Political Action Committee to massively get out the labor vote for FDR in 1944. Previous Lichtenstein writings have shown that even within Reuther's circle third party sentiment was commonplace, that a break with Democrats was close in the postwar [MDM, 304-5], that Reuther himself came out in 1948 for a party based on labor before finally rallying to Truman and the Democrats; Reuther continued to toy with alternatives on its liberal fringes through groupings like the Americans for Democratic Action. The 1948 Wallace campaign expressed this phenomenon in its own way.

In other words, Lichtenstein's brand of politicized bargaining was not so solidly rooted in key sectors of the working population. What's more, as viewed from the shop-floor at the time, it did not appear wholly progressive, especially as the realities of the mandatory grievance arbitration system took hold: in addition to the objective or subjective factors mentioned thus far, collective bargaining itself fell victim, says Lichtenstein, to its own inner logic, which necessarily dampening shop-floor militancy:

> The situation was inherently unstable, *even before the conservative turn* in American politics put union militancy and shop floor activism under a cloud. Whatever its inherent legitimacy among rank-and-file workers, the shop traditions that periodically shut down the line or disrupted production *subverted the very idea of a collective-bargaining agreement*. Managers denounced such activism as illegitimate 'wildcat' stoppages that violated the contract and robbed collective bargaining of its usefulness. They complained that unless union leaders guaranteed labor peace during the life of an agreement, their incentive to bargaining would disappear. And most union officials, from John L. Lewis and Sidney Hillman right down to the most radical local union leaders, had to recognize the logic of this imperative, which is one reason that a tradition of shop syndicalism never quite achieved the kind of legitimacy in the past-1940 era that it had won during the era of the Industrial Workers of the World a generation before. [SOU, 62]

Given the very nature of collective bargaining, and the "orderly" relations it requires in each workplace, the balance of class power was

clearly shifted into management hands. [MDM, 153] This order was secured though the stabilization of union leadership, thanks to the system of industrial jurisprudence's introduction of the union shop:

> At this most immediate and crudely political level, Reuther and the other union officials wanted an umpire system in order to protect the leadership from the consequences of undisciplined shop-floor militancy. GM department representatives had found their days and nights consumed with stopping these wildcat stoppages ["Great Expectations", 129].

Such was the existential dilemma of trade unionists, that of conciliating the right to strike with the daily functioning stability of contractual relations. After taking political advantage of the former UAW president's attempt to stabilize the internal union regime, Reuther himself fell prey to the same dilemma and risks: "Like Martin, Reuther had become a prisoner of the corporation's demand for continuous production, and like Martin, he was coming under attack from militants in the shop." [MDM, 147] It was nevertheless in the name of workers' power, and the much trumpeted "ideology" of industrial democracy, that workers were deprived, as of the 1930s, of their most elementary source of power, that of shutting down the process of production.

In this way, industrial jurisprudence ultimately swayed the firm-level balance of power in favor of management. To counteract its local advantage, labor's only solution would be to look to the realm of national politics and the transformation of the American state: such was the politicized dimension of the bargaining regime. But many laborites would take issue with the premise that even an all-inclusive political construct could offset management prerogatives if not grounded in workers' fundamental power over production: the 1930s political and social legacy, all will agree, is inseparable from strike and struggle. So in the final analysis, the degree to which politicized bargaining was actually achieved is more debatable than *State of the Union* leads the reader to believe.

We have seen through this overview of Lichtenstein, culminating in *State of the Union*, that the more postwar bargaining is portrayed as a defeat the more it is opposed to the preceding system of politicized bargaining. This historical frame implies a characterization of the New Deal, and its balance of social forces right down to the shop floor, as being intent upon and able to ensure equitable collective bargaining. Lichtenstein thus consolidates his hypotheses over time and by doing so, globally reinforces his own chronological approach, which places the key turn of contemporary politics in the immediate postwar period. But in order to

justify his most recent hypothesis of postwar firm-centered collective bargaining as outright defeat he tends to lend the New Deal ever greater virtues, to the point, we believe, of weakening or even omitting previous arguments whereby the author explained how labor had found itself on the defensive, especially due to unfulfilled political expectations.

Defining Labor's Multiple Roles

We would like to highlight here some terms that are used by a number of American labor historians, and Lichtenstein in particular, and which cover different conceptual spheres than when used in Europe. They include corporatism, popular front and social democracy. The way they are applied in the United States reveals one dimension of labor and 20th century labor questions which we believe needs to be further addressed, i.e. the multiple roles that trade unionism adopted in the postwar period.

1. Clarifying terms

In the U.S., "corporatism/corporatist" is essentially interchangeable with tripartite, meaning any joint government, industry and labor body, most prominently those set up within the World War II defense state. This participation was active and enthusiastically undertaken by CIO unionists, from Washington's economic commissions down to local defense industry centers like Detroit, where UAW officials helped implement wartime manpower policies in factories and public services in communities (transportation, day care [...]). American labor historians tend to present corporatism as a largely positive phenomenon, an opportunity for laborite influence in public affairs. In doing so, they are but mirroring a major aspiration of most CIO labor leaders at the time, especially the United Automobile Workers Union's (UAW) Walter Reuther. Thus, when referring to the politicized nature of labor relations during the war Lichtenstein notes: "Corporatism of this sort placed capital-labor relations within a highly centralized government context, where representatives of the contending 'peak' organizations bargained politically for their respective constituencies." [SOU, 101]

As for Walter Reuther, "an imaginative planner, he would link union power with government authority in what we might label today a

'corporatist' framework [...] a more stable and humane framework."[MDM, 155] The term comes back repeatedly in Lichtenstein and most often in this positive light: when questioning whether the old New Dealers succeeded in their last attempt to politicize the bargaining regime, his chapter subtitle reads "Corporatism in the Sixities?" [SOU, 132]

In Europe the distinction between tripartism and corporatism is crucial. At its best "tripartism" is a balanced playing field of social partners where unions impose their demands upon government and business, thanks to their degree of organization and mobilization. On the other hand "corporatism" is opposite in nature, for since Mussolini's attempt to destroy independent organizations through their integration into the state apparatus, it has been associated with fascism. As unions became direct instruments of running the economy, class struggle was subordinated to upholding the "common good".

The "popular front" was the name of 1930s government coalitions bringing together Communists, Socialists and left-leaning bourgeois parties against the fascist threat. (In France, the socialist S.F.I.O. governed with the bourgeois Radical Party, the Communist Party remaining outside but giving critical support.) Popular Front coalitions were broader alliances against fascism including trade unions and associations, as in the U.S. during that time, around the U.S. Communist Party. "Social Democracy" officially means those political parties having origins in the Second International (France's S.F.I.O. meant "French Section of the Workers' International). In the forefront of 20th century struggles for welfare state reforms within the capitalist system, these "reformist" parties are distinguished from "revolutionary" Communist parties which promoted the violent overthrow of capitalism to achieve social transformation. It should be noted that Socialist parties traditionnaly have their roots in the working class, linked to the trade unions and are component parts of the "labor movement." Such is not systematically the case in U.S. labor history, where "social democracy" is freely applied to the non-communist left, labor and even liberal Democrats.

Reference to American "social democracy" is frequently found in Lichtenstein's work when describing welfare state programs or policies, unions or political trends. Walter Reuther's agenda was that of an "American Social Democracy" [chapter title, MDM] and Reuther "understood, as so many did not, that for labor's voice to carry real weight he had to reshape the consciousness of millions of industrial workers,

making them disciplined trade unionists, militant social democrats, and racial egalitarians." [MDM, 301] The label in the strict sense could formally apply to Reuther himself; who had been a card-carrying member of the the U.S. Socialist Party and then later worked with Social Democratic parties around the world.

The New Deal was for all intents and purposes, America's "Popular Front."Likewise, the New Deal coalition regrouping CIO unionists and liberal Democrats became the homegrown version of Social Democracy, occupying the equivalent political space to social democratic or labor parties in Western Europe and the Commonwealth. Lichtenstein says as much, regarding the 1944 elections and the PAC: "Unionism boosted turnout and Democratic Party loyalty for fully a third of the electorate, so partisan politics in the early postwar era had something of a *social-democratic* flavor." [SOU, 104-105]

Such assimilations are both intellectually satisfying and useful to highlight trends among workers' experiences worldwide. They conveniently fill the gap left by that aspect of American "exceptionalism" which is the lack of any mass political organization speaking in the name of working people and their families. But the amalgamations can also be problematic when referring to political parties without references to their historical or class roots, or clouding over the distinct nature between unions and political parties.

This "nature" derives from their particular constituencies, from the differing roles and responsibilities that respectively incur upon labor parties and labor unions in a democratic society and which, in most countries, create a sort of division of labor between them. And so, while political parties entering government and making public policy are part of their function, the same is not true of unions. During France's Popular Front, for example, even while Socialist Party leaders were in government, unionists were in the factories and the streets mobilizing massive support among the working population for institutional reforms: each carried out its own, indispensable roles, on its own specific ground.

The absence of this kind of division of labor and its consequences constitute one dimension of the U.S. labor question which is rarely addressed. By not doing so, labor historians only reproduce a quasi-permanent confusion between "political" and "trade union" activities, which is a characteristic trait of the New Deal-CIO coalition itself. The

current consensus around the AFL-CIO's "social unionism" finds its origins here.

One expression of this confusion is the free and interchangeable use of adjectives like "liberal" and "progressive."The lack of definition or distinction has at least one significant effect, that of blurring class lines. And so, armed with liberal and progressive credentials, the labor-liberal alliance is automatically deemed apt to defend workers' interests in electoral politics and government spheres. Blurred class lines are a precondition for the loose application of terms like social democratic to a party with no working class roots. Thus UAW liberalism aspired to bring about the "crystallization of a *social democratic* current inside the urban-labor wing of the *Democratic Party*" [MDM, 306, chapter "An American Social Democracy"].

Free use of political notions also serves to minimize the import of World War II "corporatism." As long as unions' roles were judged progressive, their quasi-governmental functions in running the wartime state apparatus at all levels were taken for granted. But this corporatism resulted in U.S. labor leaders adopting multiple roles, in addition to those directly associated with the trade union mandate.

2. Labor's Multiple Roles

Among labor historians, Lichtenstein goes furthest in exploring the repercussions of World War II labor statesmanship for workers and their trade unions. In a chapter aptly entitled "A Faustian Bargain" [*Labor's War at Home*] he points out the pros and cons of such a corporatist bargain. Wartime agencies, especially the tripartite War Labor Board, socialized much of the trade union movement's prewar agenda, thus making gains like seniority and grievance systems standard entitlements for extended working class sectors.

But Lichtenstein still asks, were unionists like Reuther making a Faustian bargain? Their unions had become "ensnared in a process that would cede much freedom and legitimacy to the warfare state" and the no-strike pledge—whereby unionists committed themselves to the war effort, striving to ensure continued war production by blocking industrial actions—inevitably opposed union leaders to their own militant rank and file. The multiplication of tasks which came with running the war through participation in government agencies would bloat union bureaucracy. As a

tireless legislator, lobbyist, planner, tribune, Walter Reuther was the emblematic labor statesman. His Washington work "distanced him from ordinary workers and feisty local union officers, whose interests he now felt to be but one pressure among many within this half-constructed corporatist order." [MDM, 181] This "distance" taken by Reuther and others was therefore from their role as trade union leaders, which is primarily defined by the mandate they receive to satisfy their members' demands. In the meantime, they were assuming multiple identities as state managers, Washington lobbyists, politicians and finally campaign operatives who spared no efforts to rally unconditionally for an FDR victory in 1944.

All of this converged in politicized bargaining's aim of accomplishing labor's "larger ambitions," which, in Lichtenstein, is a euphemism for its political agenda. But at the same time, political bargaining's all-encompassing mandate obliges both trade unionists, and their historians, to clarify terms. Which movement should be labeled as progressive or social-democratic, and therefore endorsed in a year like 1944? On the one hand, there were CIO statesmen who, by choosing to uphold the defense state rallied workers electorally and so "boosted turnout and Democratic loyalty." [*State of the Union*] On the other, there were rank and file workers starting to move in the opposite direction, away from the Democratic Party. In the past, Lichtenstein has enhanced the content of political independence in groupings like the UAW's Rank and File Tendency which, at the union's 1944 convention, clamored at once to revoke the no-strike pledge, break with the defense state and form a third party, a new political party defending the interest of workers.

Which one of the movements is progressive for Lichtenstein? Both one and the other, depending on the bibliographical reference in question. Industrial unionists were trying to assume their multiple roles. But they could not at once integrate and uphold state institutions as labor statesmen and simultaneously mobilize workers' countervailing power around their particular interests, as unions had done in the 1930s—on both sides of the Atlantic—resulting in the transformation of state institutions for the popular, not the "common," good. Building upon their experience in the World War II defense state, U.S. unionists would pursue their new identities and thereby help shape the model of postwar labor.

3. The Postwar Model of Trade Unionism

What we have called labor's "multiple roles" brought some unions to act as—or occupy the space of—political party, lobby, electoral machine, family or community center, hospital, bank, insurance company...

Politically, it has been argued that one union, the UAW, became the preeminent force of liberalism in postwar America. The automobile workers devoted enormous means to influencing government intervention into the economy, the growth of the welfare state, civil rights, U.S. foreign policy in the Cold War. For Walter Reuther, the UAW's role in promoting a liberal America was indispensable, for the Democratic Party was "not a labor party."[Boyle, 1995]

AFL-CIO unionists were still labor statesmen in the 1960s. At the very moment when America's cities and neighborhoods were ablaze, these statesmen turned once again towards government agencies and tripartite action from above to resolve working people's ills, as through President Kennedy's Labor-Management Advisory committee. Lichtenstein himself begs for a comparison with the World War II governing regime when placing this experience under the auspices of "corporatism." [*State of the Union*]

One conspicuous role, that of labor "lobby," is particularly illustrative of the effects such activities and the causes they defend could have on the nature of unions. It was not just labor's detractors, be they traditional conservative foes or, as Lichtenstein notes, former industrial pluralist allies, who labeled labor as mere lobby. It is worth noting to what extent the AFL-CIO enthusiastically embraced this role, to the point of becoming a forerunner for modern public interest groups and political action committees. In the 1950s and 1960s, the AFL-CIO and its C.O.P.E. lobbying branch defending causes as diverse as public housing and aid for the poor, Medicare, national public education.

In these instances, the labor lobby's primary constituencies were not necessarily union members: certainly not the poor receiving aid for—almost as a rule—union members had higher-than-average living standards for working people. As for public housing, whereas the UAW aspired housing for one third of the population, and despite mammoth efforts, only a small fraction of the population ever profited and even a smaller proportion of union families. The 1963 national law on education was a case in point, for the labor lobby deliberately favored constituencies other than its own members. In the name of obtaining a federally

mandated law to ensure equal educational opportunities for all children, whatever the socio-economic level of the communities where they reside, the federation and teachers' unions had to engage in tough give-and-take bargaining to gain concessions from competing lobbies, mostly private confessional schools. And as the bargaining logic goes, gaining concessions meant trading off labor's most powerful bargaining chip, which in this case was teacher salary demands, ultimately the big losers of the law. Finally, industrial workers as well were somewhat critical of the AFL-CIO's legislative lobbying priorities as shop-floor working conditions degraded and accidents multiplied. Despite this era of labor's greatest organized strength, of crushing two-thirds Democratic majorities with undivided government, a law regulating even elementary workplace safety and health issues, the 1970 Occupational Safety and Health Act, obtained much too little and came way too late.

These examples illustrate to what extent the multiple roles played by labor leaders "distanced" them from their elementary function of carrying out the union mandate. And so what began with labor statesmen's rapprochement to the World War II defense state apparatus ended up impacting the very model of trade unionism in the United States. The interests of "ordinary workers and feisty local union officers" had now institutionally become but "one pressure among many" among the various constituencies of labor leaders.

In this way, in their efforts to solve the labor question, unions played a variety of roles. This experience deserves more attention when considering the state of 20th century U.S. unionism? The roles sought to channel national political protest through institutional pressure, reserving militant strike action to support firm-centered contract negotiations. In this way as well, they date back to the wartime imperative for social peace.

Thus the questions we'd like to address to Nelson Lichtenstein. To what extent did wartime corporatism, in the sense of state institutions tending to integrate class organizations and struggle, affect the nature of U.S. unions? And especially, how did unions' multiple roles affect the postwar "defeat," be this on the grounds of elections, legislation or contract negotiating? For Lichtenstein, labor's multifaceted identity is presented as an inherent trait of U.S. trade unionism. American organized labor is "unique and transcendent, for the unions combine features inherent to an expansive social movement, an ideological formation, a

political lobby effort and an institution designed to micromanage the labor market, both inside the workplace and out." [SOU]

However, these innovative attempts to satisfy labor's "larger ambitions" have had implications upon the nature and model of postwar labor, notably the "distance" they introduced between leaders and members. And the relinquishment of more militant forms of workers protest implied was not indifferent to the "distance" labor took from the social movements of the 1960s.

Conclusion: Nelson Lichtenstein vs Walter Reuther

In conclusion, the reader should not be surprised to find many references made to Walter Reuther in this paper, as in Lichtenstein, his biographer. In many ways, Lichtenstein's pursuance of unions and the 20th century labor question has been what one might call a "career-long, academic factional struggle" with the ideological, idealistic, combative leader of industrial America's path-breaking union. I first met Nelson during the summer of 1985 at Wayne State University's Walter Reuther Archives in Detroit. Years later, in 1997, Nelson was surprised when I recalled how already at that time, 10 years before the publication of his landmark biography, he was already pondering, ruminating, throwing out ideas and testing formulations, concerned about how to best do historical justice to Reuther and the narrative history of industrial unionism he was about to write.

In this sense, it is safe to say that the publication of his landmark 1995 biography of Walter Reuther was, for Lichtenstein, as much history as catharsis. He recounts the militant life of an exceptional figure who spent most of his waking hours fighting, for his conception of democracy in the workplace, for more unionism in a better America, for power within his own organization and without. As a conclusion, in the face of the labor movement's erstwhile woes, Lichtenstein opened future perspectives by asking "What would Walter do?"

Seven years later with *State of the Union*, Lichtenstein ends with his own ideas about how labor should meet the challenges of the new century. To this effect, he answers the question: "What would Nelson do?"

Lichtenstein's main design is to rebuild and reinforce trade unions. He explains why, despite its recent emergence and certain advantages in the

courts, the so-called rights-based model of social regulation cannot replace one based on the collective advancement of mutual interests. This defense of unions as a component part of democracy is welcome at a time when some would like to dissolve trade unions into the indiscriminate context of "civil society."

The author concludes with three strategic proposals for the future of labor which, maybe not surprisingly, bring Walter Reuther to mind.

The first is the need for "militancy," as the union movement was built and has always imposed its will through struggle. The leader of some of the century's great strikes, Reuther would certainly agree.

The second is "internal democracy." This is where the two most diverge: the UAW's tough internal regime under Reuther would not meet the standards of participatory culture urged by Lichtenstein to democratize labor organizations.

Finally, there is the "political dimension." Lichtenstein concludes with an appeal for political action in favor of labor's legislative agenda and workplace rights. He advances the need for a strong social-democratic movement, linking unionists to a broader liberal constituency and for independent labor political action within the broad Democratic Party sphere.

For all intents and purposes, regarding labor's role in society and politics, what would Nelson do? Pretty much what Walter would have done. It seems, then, that in this career-long factional struggle, as was often the case in such struggles, Walter has won.

Works Cited and References

Works by Nelson Lichtenstein

Lichtenstein, Nelson. *Labor's War at Home: the CIO in World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Lichtenstein, Nelson and Meyer, Stephen (eds). *On the Line: Essays in the History of Auto Work*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989.

Lichtenstein, Nelson. "From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclispe of Social Democracy in the Postwar Era", in Steven Fraser and Gary Gerstle (eds), *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*: 1930-1980. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

Lichtenstein, Nelson. *Who Built America*: *Working People and the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture and Society*, vol. II. New York: American Social History Project, 1992.

Lichtenstein, Nelson and Harris, Howell John. *Industrial Democracy in America: The Ambiguous Promise*. New York: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1993.

Lichtenstein, Nelson. "Great expectations: the promise of industrial jurisprudence and its demise, 1939-1960", in Lichtenstein, Nelson and Harris, Howell John, *Industrial Democracy in America: The Ambiguous Promise*. New York: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1993.

Lichtenstein, Nelson. *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*. New York: BasicBooks, 1995.

Lichtenstein, Nelson. *State of the Union*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002

Works by other authors

Bernstein, Irving. *The Turbulent Years*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971.

Boyle, Kevin. *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism*, 1945-1968. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995.

Brody, David. *Workers in Industrial America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.

Brody, David. «Workplace contractualism in comparative perspective », Lichtenstein, Nelson and Harris, Howell John, *Industrial Democracy in America: The Ambiguous Promise*.New York: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1993.

Cohen, Lizabeth. *Making a New Deal: Industriel Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Davis, Mike. *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy of the U.S. Working Class*. London: Verso Press, 1986.

Fine, Sydney, *The Automobile Under the Blue Eagle*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963.

Fraser, Steve and Gerstle, Gary. *the Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*: 1930-1980. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

Halpern, Martin. *UAW Politics in the Cold War Era.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988.

Lipset, Seymour Martin. "Roosevelt and the Protest of the 1930s". *Minnesota Law Review*, vol. 68:173, p 273-298.

Meyer, Stephen. "The State and the Workplace: *New Deal* Labor Policy, the UAW & Allis-Chalmers in the 1930s and 1940s", Illinois Institute of Technology, unpublished paper; 1987.

Montgomery, David. *Workers Control in America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Radosh, Ronald. "The Myth of the New Deal", in Ronald Radosh and Murry Rothbard (eds), *A New History Leviathan: Essays on the Rise of the American Corporate State*. New York: Dutton, 1972.

Tomlins, Christopher. *The State and the Unions: Labor Relations, Law and the Organized Labor Movement in America, 1880-1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1985.

Weir, Margaret and Theda Skocpol. "State Structures and the Possibilities for 'Keynesian' Responses to the Great Depression in Sweden, Britain and the United States". Evans, Peter B., Rueschemeyer, Dietrich, and Skicpol, Theda (eds), *Bringing the State Back In*. Cambridge: Cambrige University Press, 1990.

Zieger, Robert H. *American Workers, American Unions, 1920-1985*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.