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Nelson Lichtenstein, The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor

Joseph M. Turrini
Wayne State University, jturrini@wayne.edu

strikers: "The only Black sit-downer in the Flint strikes was Roscoe Van Zandt in Plant 4. At first, the southern white workers didn't know what to make of it. All they could say to him was, 'What the hell are you doing here? You haven't got any job to protect.' ... When it came time for the victory parade, the strikers voted for Roscoe Van Zandt to carry the flag out of the plant." (24)

But even readers long familiar with such inspiring pictures of the Flint sit-down may find themselves brought up short by the story of Johnson's subsequent suffering. Blacklisted in Flint, she embarked on a speaking tour for the CIO. It left her exhausted; she collapsed from tuberculosis, losing a lung. Shortly thereafter she lost her youngest boy, Jarvis, in a car accident. Then her older son, Dennis, died of multiple sclerosis. She and Kermit separated.

Despite these agonizing tragedies, Johnson was soon remarried to Sol Dollinger, a socialist and trade unionist, who would be her steadfast companion for the next half-century. During World War II, she became an industrial worker and effective rank-and-file organizer of women war workers in Detroit, only to suffer a brutal beating at the hands of mafia goons in 1945. In 1977, when invited back by the UAW and GM for a 40-year anniversary celebration of the sit-downs, she declined but showed up to issue a strongly worded denunciation of "tuxedo unionism," that is, bureaucratic cosiness with corporations, and concessionary bargaining, which were destroying the UAW she built.

One can only hope that the militant labour movement Genora Johnson Dollinger hoped to see revive will be aided by Susan Rosenthal's marvellous oral history. *Striking Flint* provides a new generation with the bracing story of woman who to the end of her life remained dedicated to "social ownership of the means of production" as the only way "to stop the ruling class from dominating humanity, and for working people to achieve their liberation." (41)

Christopher Phelps
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Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books 1995).

THE UNITED Automobile Workers Union (UAW) has been a popular research topic of historians, journalists, activists, and other labour specialists, giving us a not only vast, but also highly contentious literature on the topic. No single person is more central to these scholarly and contemporary debates than long time (1946-1970) UAW president, Walter Reuther. Discussions of Reuther's leadership often revolve around the factional struggles that the UAW encountered — and in which Reuther played a pivotal role —during the 1930s and 1940s. Any biography of Reuther is necessarily, therefore, cast into a web of highly polemical and tendentious debates which seemingly require the author to declare allegiance to one side or the other.

Nelson Lichtenstein's recent biography of Walter Reuther is a welcome contribution to this literature. Much to his credit, Lichtenstein skillfully avoids simply taking sides in the fifty-year debate. Neither celebrating nor vilifying Reuther, Lichtenstein attempts to understand the ambitious politically and socially motivated labour leader within the specific context which he lived. Lichtenstein convincingly argues that Reuther consistently sought broader social and political changes, but that Reuther failed when he became "imprisoned within institutions, alliances, and ideological constructs that were largely of his own making." (300)

World War II is the crucial period in Lichtenstein's analysis. During World War II, Lichtenstein argues, Reuther abandoned the shopfloor syndicalism that

the auto workers utilized successfully in the mid-1930s in favour of corporatist solutions. This "Faustian Bargain" provided Reuther access into elite political and business circles but also required compromises which hindered his capacity to transform larger society. While the UAW made advances for its members, increasing wages, benefits, working conditions, and job stability, the range of possibilities for the UAW to create political and social change narrowed. When political and social radicalism emerged strongly in the 1960s, Reuther's attachment to limited collective bargaining goals, his alliance with the Democratic party, and his desire to maintain unquestioned leadership in the UAW all hindered his ability to embrace others who shared goals of broader social and political change. He became trapped by the political and social world he had created.

A central component of the bargain that Reuther made with political and business leaders included, according to Lichtenstein, the control of a sometimes turbulent and unpredictable rank-and-file. Reuther's desire to achieve political power and maintain dominance in the UAW required that the UAW become a "responsible" union which submitted to a system of "industrial jurisprudence" to solve shopfloor problems. This led to the creation of highly complex, slow, and often unresponsive grievance procedures, which left committeemen with little shopfloor power. Early attempts of the UAW to play a larger role in the workplace failed to displace traditional management prerogatives. The UAW and Reuther became attached to strict enforcement of contracts which both provided material gains to its members, and sometimes constrained rank-and-file militancy.

In Lichtenstein's analysis, Reuther's alliance with the Democratic party proved most limiting to his larger goals. He supported Socialist party candidates like Norman Thomas in the early 1930s, but by World War II abandoned any hope of third party politics. He focused his attention on realigning the Democratic party, attempting to transform it into a truly liberal-labour party. Reuther's alliance with the Democratic party was seductive in its potential; but real power within the party proved quite illusive. The alliance led to some of Reuther's more difficult and embarrassing political compromises. The tactics used by Reuther in attempting to undermine the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party at the 1964 Convention, for example, were unseemly and belied his very public support of mainstream civil rights organizations.

Lichtenstein argues that Reuther became trapped not just by the institutions which he helped create and the alliances he forged, but also by an ideological narrowing of political options in the postwar period. At the same time, we might quibble with Lichtenstein's emphasis of causality on the narrowing of the political landscape. He argues that the general rightward shift that followed the 1946 election combined with the growth of anti-communism led to a "sharp turn against Communists within virtually all labor and liberal organizations." (257) Lichtenstein acknowledges the rank and often opportunistic nature of Reuther's widely cast anti-communism, but he also sees Reuther's attacks as a necessary reaction to the more general anti-communism growing in politics and society. Anti-communism, in this perspective, was necessary for the very survival of the UAW. But this is misleading. Reuther and other important UAW staffers such as Joe Rauh played early and critical roles in legitimizing the pervasive anti-communism that defined postwar American liberalism. In addition, Reuther's anti-communism was much more than a reaction to the 1946 election and the rightward turn of American politics. Reuther used anti-communism to bludgeon many of his enemies well before 1946 and often in a haphazard fashion which helped delegitimize any politics to the left of his own. Reuther's anti-communism thus had a serious impact in narrowing the political

possibilities in the Democratic party. When Lichtenstein argues that Reuther "positioned the UAW at the left margin of conventional politics," (303) he suggests that Reuther analyzed the politics of the possible and sought the most radical position available. But this is again misleading. Reuther was positioned "at the left margin" of mainstream politics primarily because he had made — in liberal organizations like ADA and in the UAW — politics any further left susceptible to anti-communist attacks from many different quarters.

It is unfortunate that Lichtenstein, who pays close attention and attempts to address important political and racial issues in a nuanced manner, fails to address gender issues. In the early portions of the books, which deal with the formative years of the UAW, Lichtenstein contents with the organization of female workers into the UAW. But after Lichtenstein follows Reuther's corporatist turn during World War II, women disappear entirely from the book. The UAW Women's Department developed into an important organization both within the UAW and within the larger trade union and feminist movements. Yet it is entirely absent from Lichtenstein's study. Moreover, it is probably not a coincidence that when Lichtenstein addresses women skillfully, he relies almost exclusively on the secondary work of other historians, as opposed to making his own original contributions. We must conclude that after World War II either Reuther had no concern for women's issues or the Women's Department, or that Lichtenstein found them insufficiently important to include. Neither explanation is very satisfying.

Placing the above criticisms aside, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* is a consistently and convincingly argued book. It is well informed by the secondary literature and based on extensive primary research. Lichtenstein attempts to see Reuther as a complex and powerful political and trade union leader who operated within a specific political and social context. He should be applauded for trying to understand Reuther outside of rank polemical terms, a perspective which will certainly attract more academic critics than allies. This is a major contribution to the already rich UAW historiography which is sure to continue old debates while also beginning new ones.

Joseph M. Turrini
Wayne State University

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

BOYLE CHALLENGES the emerging argument that during the height of postwar liberal ascendancy, a centralized and bureaucratized labour movement sowed the seeds of its own destruction by abandoning hopes for a social democratic breakthrough. He does this by focusing on one of the largest and most politically active unions in the country: the UAW. He concentrates his analysis on four national policy areas (full employment, federal urban policy, African-American civil rights, and the containment of Communism in Asia) and presidential election campaigns between 1945 and 1968, which together lay at the centre of both the UAW's and the nation's agenda during this period. He doesn't hesitate to admit that his approach is unabashedly top-down, institutional history.

Boyle locates the UAW, its top leaders, and especially its president, Walter Reuther, as the "inheritors of the social democratic ideological and political formations" that the union struggled to establish in earlier decades, and the forces that kept the quest for progressive politics alive. The post-war UAW leadership built a cross-class, biracial reform coalition based on unionists, middle-class liberals, and African Americans. It appealed to middle-class liberals by supporting economic growth and anti-communism, and