Labor and the Cold War: A Fifty-Year Perspective

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Roughly fifty years after the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) purged communist-led unions from its membership, the Southwest Labor Studies Association met in San Francisco from April 29 to May 1, 1999, to reconsider the history and implications of this event and, more broadly, to attempt to untangle the connections between and among McCarthyism, anticommunist liberalism, and the political trajectory of organized labor during the postwar era. Bringing together labor activists, union members, and academics, panels considered these themes from a number of perspectives and methodological approaches. Papers focused on such topics as the dynamics of political repression, the effectiveness of liberal anticommunist politics for organized labor, and the role of the state in shaping the labor movement.

Ellen Schrecker (Yeshiva University) drew on her considerable scholarship on McCarthyism for the conference's keynote address, providing a general survey that nicely set up the specific issues considered by subsequent sessions. Schrecker reviewed McCarthyism's impact on organized labor, examined its formal and informal networks of anticommunist repression, and outlined its consequences. McCarthyism, she concluded, was a crucial factor in turning labor from a social movement into a special interest group, reducing the political options available on the Left.

But how did the tactics of McCarthyism play out on the ground? This question was addressed very successfully by a panel titled, appropriately enough, "The Cold War at the Local Level." Vernon Pedersen (American University in Bulgaria) examined several House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) investigations into the Communist party (CP) and organized labor in Maryland. Stressing the need to integrate the backdrop of national and international events into our understanding of particular cases, Pedersen highlighted the Maryland CP's ability to maintain its organization well into 1957 despite the efforts of HUAC. In his study of the postwar labor movement in Evansville, Indiana, Samuel White (University of Missouri, Columbia) unpacked the different factors responsible for the decline of the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers (UE) union, advancing the concept of "popular anticommunism" to capture how the substantial appeal of anticommunism extended well beyond business and political elites. Kenneth Burt (California Federation of Teachers) presented a fascinating examination of the intersection of race, labor, anticommunism, and religion in East Los Angeles in his paper on the UE and the Catholic Labor Institute. Highlighting the role of local politics, Burt looked at the obstacles the UE faced in organizing workers in East Los Angeles, where Catholic priests, using lists of addresses provided by the Federal Bureau of In-

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vestigation, went to the homes of Latino workers to persuade them to oppose the UE. Burt pointed out the ability of anticommunism to foster apparently unlikely political coalitions, noting how Catholic elites were able to use anticommunism to garner not only the support of business, but also the backing of anticommunist labor. Commenting on the presentations, Robert Cherny (San Francisco State University) observed how the papers echoed Schrecker's emphasis on complex networks of anticommunist institutions that extended beyond the formal bureaucracies of the state. During the ensuing discussion period, the need to unravel how anticommunism was used and deployed in different conflicts by varying political factions was highlighted.

David Brody (University of California, Davis) chaired perhaps the most controversial session of the conference, a reevaluation of the political costs and benefits of anticommunism to the labor movement. In a provocative historiographic intervention, Anders Lewis (University of Florida) set out to rehabilitate the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the career of George Meany, and the ideology of liberal anticommunism. Observing that the AFL's anticommunism is often seen as contributing to the decline of the labor movement, Lewis claimed that he did not intend to argue that Meany was a great leader, nor did he intend to rehabilitate the cause of McCarthyism. Rather, Lewis called for a more balanced portrait of Meany, the AFL, and their legacy. Framing his work as a direct challenge to the interpretations of Schrecker, Howell John Harris, Kevin Boyle, and Paul Buhle, among others, Lewis argued that the AFL and its brand of anticommunist liberalism were far more successful than these historians have acknowledged, and asserted that the AFL's anticommunism, at its best, was a reasonable and humane reaction to Stalinism. Although the AFL did not represent a radical challenge to capitalism, and though it was less attentive to race and gender than were CP-led unions, Lewis concluded that it effectively represented a large portion of the American working class by securing rising real wages, pensions, job safety, and political clout.

Seth Widgerson (University of Maine), in a trenchant examination of anticommunist labor during the Korean War, explored how anticommunist liberalism worked out in practice, focusing on the United Auto Workers and the CIO generally. Widgerson argued that these unions succeeded in protecting past economic gains during the Korean War, but that their loyalty to President Harry Truman and the Democratic party kept them from mounting a substantial challenge to the government. Walter Reuther, Widgerson observed, could not take direct action and send masses of workers to march on Lansing, Michigan, or Washington, DC—he could only maneuver through the bureaucratic tangle that constituted government-labor relations. In a lucid comment on both papers, Dana Frank (University of California, Santa Cruz) drew attention to Widgerson's success in restoring complexity to a period of history that is too often taken for granted. Frank proposed that attending to what was at stake for the CIO in America's search for foreign markets and raw materials during the Cold War might further illuminate organized labor's commitment to liberal anticommunism. Praising Lewis for his focus on the AFL during the mid-twentieth centu-

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ry, Frank noted the many openings for more scholarship on this topic. However, she urged caution in attempting to consider the benefits of a principled, liberal anticommunist worldview separately from the costs of domestic political repression carried out in the name of liberal anticommunism, arguing that both of these aspects of AFL liberalism must be considered together. Frank was struck by the absence of women and people of color from both papers (on this subject, see Frank's "White Working-Class Women and the Race Question," *ILWCH* 54 [1998]:80–102) and concluded by asking the audience to consider the implications this absence holds for future research.

A panel on "Race Relations in the San Francisco Bay Area from World War II through the Cold War" featured two local studies with larger ramifications. In her paper on job discrimination in the San Francisco Bay Area during World War Two, Donna Murch (University of California, Berkeley) made impressive use of Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) records to reconstruct how discrimination functioned in Oakland's wartime defense industries. Murch richly documented how African-American workers—many of whom had recently migrated to the Bay Area from the South—turned to the FEPC to successfully fight discrimination at the workplace. Focusing on the issue of police brutality, Peter Shulman (University of Michigan) demonstrated the remarkable ability of the Bay Area CP to form political coalitions with civil rights groups and focus the attention of the California Assembly on the problems of police misconduct. Overall, both papers served to urge a rethinking of the usual portrait of World War Two and the late 1940s as a time of narrowing political choices on the Left and within the working class.

In a panel on "Labor, Race, and the Red Scare: Anti-Communism's Effects on Labor and Civil Rights Organizing in the South," Michael Honey (University of Washington, Tacoma) offered a general survey of the CIO's Operation Dixie, arguing that the conservative approach of the CIO leadership, along with opposition from business and conservative political interests, hindered this project from its inception. Michael Goldfield (Wayne State University) also provided an overview of Operation Dixie, looking more closely at specific union-organizing efforts and arguing that liberal anticommunism was less a principled opposition to Josef Stalin than it was a cover for attacking the left wing of the labor movement. Following the emphasis of Honey and Goldfield on labor leadership, Charles Chamberlain (Tulane University) presented an absorbing examination of continuities and discontinuities within the working class as it confronted segregation in the South during and immediately after World War Two. Stressing the importance of community-based institutions and groups of reformers in the African-American struggle for equal treatment at the workplace, Chamberlain found that African-American workers were generally more interested in obtaining well-paying jobs than they were in the cause of workplace desegregation *per se.* Taken together, these papers underscored the need for generalizations about labor in the postwar era to account for the long shadow cast by Jim Crow in the South.

In retrospect, the conference as a whole provided a fruitful and welcome

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opportunity for academics and members of the labor movement to discuss how the choices and actions of the last half century have shaped the current political climate. The event came to a close with a May Day labor history boat tour of San Francisco Bay, providing a last chance for reflection on the relationship between the past and the present.

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