REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

Justice at Work: A Conference Honoring David Brody

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From August 8 to 10, 2002, a group of international scholars and labor practitioners attended a conference at the University of California, Santa Barbara to honor David Brody. Organized by Nelson Lichtenstein (University of California, Santa Barbara) and Bruce Nelson (Dartmouth College) around the theme "Justice at Work," the conference brought together thirty individuals from a range of perspectives, including history, sociology, political science, industrial relations practitioners, and legal, women's, and cultural studies. Brody, emeritus professor of History at University of California, Davis with a long affiliation with the Institute of Industrial Relations at University of California, Berkeley, attended the conference and offered his reflections on his craft, his students, and the labor movement. The conference provided an opportunity for those in attendance to share their thoughts on Brody's work, their own research, and the state of labor history and the labor movement.

The work of Brody marked much of the new scholarship that was presented at the conference. David Vaught (Texas A & M University) discussed Midwest miners and squatters who transformed themselves into entrepreneurial farmers in California in the post-gold rush era. These white male squatters quickly recreated Midwest traditions and institutions and in the process generated an active civic and public culture, which would give rise to University of California, Davis, among other institutions. In a paper entitled "Fantasyland, Scandalous Behavior, and Roving Jazz Bands: Public Spectacles in Coal Towns," Camille Guerin-Gonzales (University of Wisconsin) demonstrated the ways coal miners from New Mexico, Appalachia, and Wales constructed a playful political culture grounded in class and a multiplicity of racial, ethnic, gender, national, and international identities. This public, even carnivalesque culture provided a blend of resistance and accommodation to the dominant class. Bruce Nelson reconstructed the ideas and actions of Irish radicals in the progressive era who were out-of-step with a conservative Irish–American population and highlighted the importance of race and nation to individuals trying to answer the "social question."

Other papers also focused on the work of progressive era reformers and the social question. Howell Harris (University of Durham) argued that an Anglo-American convergence around the British model of industrial relations, which legitimated a place for labor, was thwarted in the United States by managers who fought in theory and practice the idea of giving organized labor a seat at the

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table. Speaking from the audience, John Laslett (University of California, Los Angeles) suggested that British capitalists and mangers did not accept organized labor's role and that there was a shared horror among business "reformers" and managers on both sides of the Atlantic around any notion that workers had a right to participate in industrial decisionmaking. In her paper on the rise of settlement and social workers, Nikki Mandell (University of Wisconsin, Whitewater) argued that civic and business reformers diverged greatly in their approach to industrial relations and that this trend was part of a shift of social work away from the labor question. Alan Derickson (Pennsylvania State University) focused on progressive era reformers and Catholics attempts to make universal health care part of the living wage and how this vision was by and large eclipsed in the 1920s when experts adopted a piecemeal approach to health care reform.

A Friday roundtable on the past and future of labor history included Lizabeth Cohen (Harvard), Judith Stein (CUNY Graduate Center), John Laslett, and Sanford Jacoby (University of California, Los Angeles). Cohen argued that future scholarship should examine the internationalization of US labor history, decline of organizing, and non-workplace dimensions of workers' experiences from consumption to community. Importantly, Cohen urged labor scholars to collaborate with scholars abroad to gain a better understanding of transnational dimensions of workers lives and struggles. Stein began by saying how scholars have been drawn to community studies, non-workplace experiences, postmodernism, and whiteness studies to understand workers' lives. She asserted that tomorrow's research should return to studying workers' struggles in relationship to social thought, law, the state, power, and class conflict. John Laslett also pointed to the importance of understanding the labor movement in relation to the evolution of liberalism and the state. Stein's call to reexamine traditional narratives touched off a lively debate about the cultural turn in the field of labor history, particularly around the significance of racial identity and opposition cultures. To be sure, the turn to culture and identity has produced a greater awareness of how diversity and uneven prosperity have assisted and hindered worker's struggles. This body of work, moreover, promises to continue influencing the ways scholars understand labor. Yet it is also clear, given the power of global capitalists, institutions, and liberalism, that a focus on the history of social thought and labor-capital relations would be helpful for those of us interested in justice at work.

On the second day of the conference, scholars presented scholarship on postwar trends in labor history and, when combined, their work sketched out the challenges facing historians and the labor movement itself. Jeff Kolnick (Southwest State University, Marshall, Minnesota) discussed his involvement with the Fannie Lou Hamer National Institute on Citizenship and Democracy, an institute dedicated to making working people a core part of K–12 instruction and improving what students know about working people's history. He contended that foundations have resisted supporting the institute's proposals because their directors view labor history as labor advocacy and labor unions as interest groups. In his paper on C. Wright Mills, Clark Kerr, and other public intellectuals in the

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Cold War era, Nelson Lichtenstein offered insight into the transformation of labor unions into an interest group. Lichtenstein argued that these postwar thinkers and scholars helped to redefine labor as an interest group and shift popular discourse away from industrial democracy, industrial pluralism and capital–labor relations to a debilitating discourse of labor management relations. The redefinition of organized labor as an interest group was also addressed by Marjorie Murphy (Swarthmore College) in a paper entitled "Finally Burying Al Shanker: The Limits of Progressive Unionism." To Murphy, Shanker's top-down, conservative approach in public employee struggles, community relations, and New York and Cold War politics exemplified the rejection by postwar union leaders of an earlier, radical model of unionism. This business union approach weakened the labor movement internally and, when combined with Lichtenstein's intellectuals, contributed to the redefinityon of labor as an interest group. John Logan (London School of Economics) presented a study of federal striker replacement legislation in the United States in the 1990s. This legislation's demise resulted from the indifference of the Clinton Administration, the political and cultural power of the business class, and political weakness of the AFL-CIO. The debates animating this legislation symbolized how far to the right capital–labor discourse and relations have moved.

The final event of the conference was a roundtable on the future of the labor movement. All the panelists noted the very real challenges facing the labor movement in the twenty-first century, and they offered both historical and contemporary models to reverse the downward and rightward trend in the US labor movement. Dana Frank (University of California, Santa Cruz) discussed the international labor movement, past and present, as well as forms of collective action and solidarity that can serve as alternatives to the business union model. These alternatives included recent organizing efforts of the Industrial Workers of the World, independent unions, mutual aid societies, anti-capitalist movements, and even food riots. These models could, she argued, complement and reinvigorate the US labor movement. Ruth Milkman's (University of California, Los Angeles and Institute of Labor and Employment) remarks centered on the West Coast and Los Angeles in particular as an important site in labor knowledge production and the new labor movement in the United States. The organizing efforts of service workers, especially immigrants, and their communities, the relative openness of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) hierarchy, and institutes such as the ILE have made, she argued, the West Coast a source of labor innovation and vitality. Kirsten Spalding (California Federation of Labor) discussed the vision of the AFL-CIO in California and the nation and its goal of having a powerful labor movement. She outlined the AFL-CIO's plan to acquire power, a plan grounded in legislative, political, and economic action. Sue Cobble (Rutgers University) drew on David Brody's insights and contended that organized labor needs to nurture its allies, be realistic about the possibilities and limits of worker agency, and remake US institutions to benefit workers and labor unions.

Like the previous day, the roundtable generated a spirited discussion about

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the future of the labor movement. One theme that emerged was why workers in the United States decide to join or not join a union. Despite some union growth in service industries, millions of workers who want a union are not joining unions. Many explained this gap by pointing to the law, public institutions, and an anti-union dominant culture as impediments to organizing. Less attention was paid to how workers themselves understand the labor movement and labor's institutions. If unions remain undemocratic and committed to "democracy from the neck down," mainstream unions will continue to be unattractive to workers. Another theme was the new labor movement outlined by Milkman and international and cross-border organizing models. Ralph Armbruster-Sandoval (University of California, Santa Barbara) reflected on pre-1920 cross-border organizing efforts along the US–Mexico border and asked what was, perhaps, the most important (and oldest) question facing the labor movement: What is the goal of organizing? What, in other words, is the vision of labor at the turn of the twenty-first century? If that vision continues to encourage shaking hands with employers, using legislation and the law, and reelecting Democrats and Republicans, the US labor movement is not likely to reverse recent trends. The reconstruction of a labor vision, as many noted, needs to include alternatives to business unionism, and capitalism, and lessons from outside of US borders. The militant worker demonstrations and general strikes in Korea, Spain, and Italy against the proliferation of neoliberal policies, for example, could serve as a starting point for understanding how and why these workers make such actions important in their daily lives.

There was, of course, no consensus on the future of the labor movement. But all agreed that the histories of working people had to have a higher profile in our education and our political culture. As was noted throughout the conference, bringing labor history into these public areas will be no easy task in a society where labor is viewed as an advocacy and interest group, where the media and K–12 curriculum filter out the role and struggles of workers. How, then, do labor scholars and union practitioners make their work relevant to the public? How can they bring the stories of working-class struggle into the public limelight and popular discourse? Many believed that justifying labor's role in society and making history more literary and accessible to non-specialists would be strategic places to start. These objectives require writing good labor history. And that idea, expressed throughout the conference, consistently returned the focus to David Brody, whose work has been a model of a useable history for scholars, practitioners, students, and citizens alike.

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