
David Brody’s book of essays is the third such compilation by an American labor historian in three years. Herbert Gutman and David Montgomery have recently published collections of their own. In each case, the selection of short writings brings together articles, unpublished papers, and talks presented at scholarly meetings which, if previously published at all, appeared in a variety of journals or in other essay collections. Brody’s Workers in Industrial America represents his research and writing over the previous two decades on the twentieth-century American labor movement. The articles that appear in this volume include three that have not been published before and seven that have either appeared in print or were delivered at conferences between 1964 and 1978.

Brody’s essays are a bountiful serving of keen insights and skillful analysis for students of American labor history. The best ones concern the decline of trade unionism in the 1920s and its rebirth in the Great Depression. In “The Rise and Decline of Welfare Capitalism,” Brody focuses on the policies of the largest American manufacturing corporations during the 1920s and early 1930s. He shows that the success of these companies in excluding unions from their plants depended on their providing steady employment and benefit programs for their workers. When the Depression forced the companies simultaneously to lay off many employees, reduce benefits, and speed up the work, their employees’ loyalty eroded rapidly and the groundwork for a period of labor-management conflict was laid. Brody reveals the dynamics of change within the American labor movement which accompanied the period of conflict from 1933 to 1941. In “The Emergence of Mass Production Unionism,” he shows how and why the American Federation of Labor failed to organize the great open-shop industries when workers in them were clamoring for unions. It was not for the lack of a plan, Brody claims, but instead a failure of nerve, a reluctance to lead mass organizing drives among workers unfamiliar with trade unions. The task fell to the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO). Brody masterfully builds his analysis of the CIO’s success from his knowledge of the changes in labor law in the 1930s, the political climate of the New Deal, the demise of corporate welfare plans, and the advent of World War II. With these two essays, Brody has provided the clearest picture we have of the underlying trends in the most important developments for labor during the twentieth century.
Aside from a chapter composed of short reviews and an address to a scholarly meeting, the remainder of Brody's book is material which has not appeared before. "The American Workers in the Progressive Era: A Comprehensive Analysis" describes the most important changes in industrial work, immigration, trade union growth, and labor politics from 1900 to 1920. Compared to the other chapters in the book, this one is the least ambitious conceptually, but it contains a valuable summary of the complex changes that took place in the first two decades of the century. Much more provocative, if also less satisfying, are the final two chapters of the book. Here Brody mulls over the gap between the labor movement's promise and performance since World War II. In both chapters ("The Uses of Power I:Industrial Battleground"; "The Uses of Power II: Political Action") he asserts that the labor movement's aspirations to democratize American life in the immediate postwar years yielded to a less expansive goal of running in harness with business and government. In industry, labor collided with corporate management's tenacious defense of its prerogatives in determining product design, prices, and profits. Labor won the right to a voice in decisions concerning wages, shop floor discipline, and other matters (these concessions, says Brody, marked the great advance from the early 1930s). In politics, it was the unions themselves which limited their role to a pressure group (albeit a quite powerful one) within the Democratic party. Brody claims that labor's traditional distrust of political parties and history of voluntaristic organization meant it was impossible to take over the Democratic party or form a third party after World War II.

The chapters of the book that deal with the post-World War II era are the least satisfactory in part because they deal with labor only in the narrowest sense. Brody ceases to discuss industrial workers themselves and turns his attention completely to the institutional labor movement — the labor unions and their political and educational wings. Such a focus leaves aside such important developments of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s as the growth of white-collar unionism and the addition of millions of women and teenagers in the service sector of the labor force. Brody's tendency to equate the labor movement with unions after the war leaves much for others to say about the recent trends among American workers. We can only hope that they will say it with as much clarity and force as Brody has.

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