The question then becomes why the SVA/Tri-State program has failed thus far. Since The Politics of Plant Closings was published, a third campaign attempted to reopen the Southside electric furnaces, in the former Jones & Laughlin mill that had been closed by the new owner, LTV Steel; the effort appears to have reached about the same point reached by the Dorothy 6 and American Standards efforts, and like them, has come to a halt. (See for example, “Steel venture’s chances of success dim with time,” Pittsburgh Press, Aug. 19, 1990.) The recurrent impasse is immensely frustrating to the persistent group of organizers (among whom I include myself) who have given a substantial chunk of their lives over the period of a decade to trying to find a new way out of the plant closing crisis. What should they — we — have learned from the repetitive pattern of failure on the brink of success, narrated by Professor Portz?

Although Portz does not quite say it, the answer seems implicit in his concluding chapters. He rightly says that in the United States economic accumulation

...is achieved through a capitalist economy characterized by private ownership and control of economic resources. A private economy is the fundamental setting that shapes American urban communities and provides the broadest parameters within which organizations and individuals pursue their many goals.

Hence:

Even in periods of economic decline, policy discussions tend to be cast in language compatible with a private economy ... [T]he presumption is that the private control of investment and other economic resources is a nonnegotiable, fundamental element that limits other policy options.

The populist strategy of the Steel Valley Authority and Tri-State Conference on Steel requires capital investment that has not been forthcoming, and predictably will not be forthcoming from private sources. In both the Dorothy 6 and Southside furnace campaigns, private capital that seemed to be available proved skittish as short-run economic conditions changed. Particularly in an industry like steel, which because of its huge investment in fixed capital yields a relatively low rate of profit in every country in the world, private capital is not going to provide the long-run, community-minded investment required to rebuild the Mon Valley.

But local, and even state government cannot provide it either. The plant closings to which the SVA/Tri-State strategy seeks to respond also devastate the tax base of local communities, and thus doom the strategy so long as it is limited to a local or regional sphere of action.

The investment required to make the SVA/Tri-State strategy succeed can only come from the national government. To put it another way, populism can only come to fruition when it loses its fear of being socialist. True enough, socialism in one steel mill, or one valley is an impossibility. But socialism in the sense of massive national funding for an industrial reconstruction administered by democratic local authorities like the SVA is not only possible, it is necessary.

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Lake Erie Fishermen: Work Tradition and Identity
by Timothy C. Lloyd and Patrick B. Mullen

L AKE Erie Fishermen is, as its subtitle tells us, a study of the work lives, tradition and identity of commercial fishermen in the western waters of the U.S. portion of Lake Erie. Through an edited series of interviews, the words of these lake men (they are all male) are used to discuss some aspects of their work lives. The result is a partial portrait of an always-small group of toilers, who are now facing occupational extinction.

Lloyd and Mullen are folklorists based in Columbus, Ohio. Operating under grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and Ohio State University, they conducted 35 interviews in the western Lake Erie area during 1983-85; they also took many photographs of various aspects of Lake Erie fishing. The authors tell us that Lake Erie Fishermen began as a quest for folklore; that proving somewhat sparse, and with their interests expanding, the authors broadened their subject matter to that of the subtitle.

The heart of the book consists of selected transcriptions from these interviews, grouped together by theme. The authors tell us that they strove for a representative sample by age and occupation. Their biggest self-admitted problem is that they had no interviews with the Portuguese gill netters who had comprised a good chunk of the work force, and who, due to changes in the law governing fishing techniques and catch, left the area during the interviewing period. The study is limited to a small group of about 100 commercial fishermen and fish house workers.

This tiny occupation is beset with problems. Faced with growing regulations (advocated by environmentalists and recreational fishing interests), a declining catch due to pollution of all kinds, and, at least in the past, over-fishing, the fishing season each year since 1950 has gotten shorter, the catch smaller and the trade less profitable. The authors feel strong sympathy for the commercial fishermen and state flatly that they “see this book as an opportunity for them to tell their (the fishermen’s) side of the story.”

Lloyd and Mullen give us a very brief history of commercial fishing in the lake, indicating that in the early twentieth century, several thousand persons were employed, despite the fact that the fish popula-
tion began to fall as early as 1875. Since 1970, when traces of mercury were found in Lake Erie fish, the industry has been in severe crisis.

One of the best sections of the book is a discussion of work technology in the industry combined with some of the best and most illustrative sets of work photographs I have seen for any occupation. In this work world, fish houses operate as the retail/wholesale centers, and in the post-war period, had controlled the ownership of the fishing fleet. Most of the fishermen interviewed were boat owners or operators; others were crewmen and still others moved up and down this fluid hierarchy. Their class position in the industry was not emphasized by the fishermen, or perhaps it was downplayed by the authors and subsumed, to a great extent, in a common trade identity.

Fishing has its skills. Highly valued by the fishermen were the skills needed to make and mend nets and to locate fish. Many of these skills, net-making for example, cannot simply be "picked up." They must be taught by someone, usually a relative or a sympathetic older fisherman. The authors provide some interesting examples of the passing on of these skills.

The book has a central chapter on the memories of retired fishermen who still strongly identify themselves as members of the trade. Their stories emphasize entry into the occupation, family ties to commercial fishing and the contrast between the past and the present. As with many retired workers, they point to a lost golden age — in this case, a golden age of fishing — a period of greater abundance of fish, purer water and stronger men.

While there are no Paul Bunyans or Joe Magarac legends among this group, there were references by some to fisherman heroes of the past. These were either men of great strength mixed with intelligence and kindness, or the "tough but fair" boss who drove his men but shared in their hard work, and gave aid to the poor. There were also a few negative figures whose stories were told primarily so that the tellers could distance themselves from the negative stereotype of the trade: a dirty, smelly alcoholic.

Danger, such as ice, rough water and fog is seen as a part of occupational identity and pride. Perhaps because of the small scale of the industry and the dominance of owner/operators, there does not seem to be much visible friction between workers demanding a safer workplace and owners resisting these additional costs. This is despite the fact that a number of stories involved owners exposing their workers to special dangers in order to boost their catch. This chapter is one which calls out for some additional minimal data. How does the accident rate in commercial fishing compare with such deadly jobs as coal mining or logging? Is it really a particularly dangerous occupation at all?

Lake Erie Fishermen has the strengths and weaknesses of a solid oral history. A good sense comes through of a group of men who define themselves by occupation, often by contrasting their job to that of others, and who take a defensive pride in their skills and lifestyle. On the other hand, dramatic entry points into the trade and colorful incidents are stressed at the expense of a more balanced portrait of the occupation and especially of the latent class economic tensions. Some discussion of wages and other standard of living questions over time would certainly have strengthened the book; so would have a discussion of the relationship between the Portuguese and the native-born fisherman, especially since there were no persons of color interviewed (or perhaps present in the industry). Finally, the very small size of this occupation is an inherent limitation, although some of the study's insights might be tried out on larger, analogous groups, such as truck drivers or workers in small-scale construction.

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From Monopoly to Competition: The Transformations of Alcoa
By George David Smith

Because I grew up in Pittsburgh in a U.S. Steel family, my perspective on the city has always focused on steel mills. The gleaming aluminum structure of the Alcoa Building on Mellon Square made little special impression, but this attitude was hardly unusual in the 1960s and 1970s. The recent restructuring of the city's economy, however, has moved many of Pittsburgh's non-steel enterprises into the spotlight, and David Smith's fine study of Alcoa, the Aluminum Corporation of America, examines one of the most important of these. Although organized around questions that particularly interest business historians, From Monopoly to Competition is a highly readable history of Alcoa. Readers in the steel City who know the history of local steel corporations will find the contrasting record of Alcoa to be a fascinating subject.

From Monopoly to Competition is a finely textured history of Alcoa organized in a chronological fashion with extended treatment of a number of themes. The story begins in 1886, when Charles Hall developed a method for smelting aluminum, then a rare metal. The Pittsburgh Reduction Company was organized in 1888 to exploit Hall's process and it erected a smelter on Smallman Street; a larger smelter was built in New Kensington in 1889. But the huge demand of Hall's process for electricity led the company to build a plant at Niagara Falls in 1893. Crucial support for this growth came from bankers Andrew W. and Richard Beatty Mellon, who made Pittsburgh Reduction the first in a string of successful industrial investments. By backing the company over the long term, the Mellons provided the necessary financial base for the young company, and aluminum became a