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**REVIEW OF *STATE OF THE UNION: A CENTURY OF AMERICAN LABOR*
BY NELSON LICHTENSTEIN**

1. I am a person.
2. With 21st-century sensibilities and deference to the 1968 Memphis sanitation strikers, this immutable fact of any individual's value will never change, and thus the need to organize workers will continue.
3. A union by definition and in practical reality is a democratic enterprise. Any corporation, or for that matter, any institution that hires labor, is not. For a variety of reasons, including monetary and political clout, corporate entities continue to market a social and moral equivalence, if not superiority, to organized labor. All this aided by the "fact" of corporate personhood.
4. Richard Behan reports on the myth that corporate personhood was supposedly established by an 1886 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Santa Clara v. the Southern Pacific Railroad*. Behan points out that the casebook "headnote" (which has no legal weight, nor can it establish precedent) contains the only mention of corporations as persons and was written as a summary by a court reporter with some level of allegiance to the railroad industry.
5. The implication for organized labor and others: ultimately, the advantage gained in those asserted "personal" rights of corporations is based on a falsehood.
6. Witness the simplistic discussion over aspects of campaign finance reform. A democratic union and an oligarchic corporation —the stockholders do not achieve their status via democratic means - are given equivalence in the rhetoric over limiting campaign contributions. The fatal political flaw, at least for the corporations, is that individual union members can vote. The almost insurmountable barrier for unions is that corporate money buys access and ultimately becomes the tipping point under this illusion of equivalence.
7. Nelson Lichtenstein's *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* offers an informative historical and philosophical summation — a true history of labor as it were, which provides the reader with the intellectual capital to wade through the "labor question." He devotes his chapters to a chronological story, an interweaving through the 20th century, of the various union movements' sometimes competing interests and the determined and almost monolithic anti-union theology of various individuals, corporations, and interest groups. All this interspersed with the on again, off again support or hostility of the governments in power.

8. Lichtenstein offers a compelling call. "[C]ollective action, institution building, and rights consciousness are not mutually exclusive," he reminds us, "and we need to quickly redress the balance if the American system of work rights is not to devolve into ineffective formalism. The best way to make sure this does not happen is to return an autonomous, democratic unionism to the workplace" (211).

9. In the conflict between capital and labor it is perhaps ironic that one of the few instances where capital takes a long view is in their ongoing goal to manipulate and ultimately eliminate organized labor, and with it, workers' democratic self-representation. As evidence Lichtenstein cites the cynical exploitation of cultural politics, the "dirty science" of anti-union paternalism, and "management by stress" (242, 244).

10. In his discussion of the principles of labor-management relations, Lichtenstein also describes the long case history of RCA— from 1930's New Jersey, to Indiana, to 1960's Memphis, to the present day maquiladoras in Ciudad Juarez— and its "spatial fix" capital flight in search of pliable non-union workers. This flight "has certainly destroyed jobs and communities in the United States, but without offering capital the decisive managerial victory for which it continually struggles" (224). Is this then the ultimate outcome of placing short term profitability over the greater good of society? The futility of such, as workers seek to organize in each locale— and were it not for the real human costs—could be almost construed as comic. Lichtenstein points out, illuminating with the vivid verbal image of a defiant union organizer, that in Ciudad Juarez "the proletarianization experience once again transformed docile girls into rebellious women" (225). The hope is in the journey.

11. Further, Lichtenstein offers three strategic propositions to rebuild organized labor for the future: militancy (to which I would add solidarity and education), internal union democracy, and politics.

12. Through education and solidarity we can ensure that labor's militancy in defense of its prerogatives can help insulate labor from the public relations scams promulgated by a corporate controlled media, a hostile corporate world, or an indifferent, if not hostile, government.

13. Internal union democracy is, as Lichtenstein points out, absolutely essential. The worth of that democracy to any individual worker must be direct and palpable. As with any political process it will take determined individuals, grassroots organizing, and yes, the return to the shop steward halting production with a single whistle blast.

14. Lichtenstein explains that the lack of a labor-based political party in America (as opposed to much of the industrial West) is a function of the inherent limitations in our "winner-take-all system" of electoral federalism. "Given the decay into which America's contemporary political-party system has fallen," he concludes, "labor must function as an independent, and sometimes as a disloyal, component of the Democratic Party coalition" (276). I have news for Nelson Lichtenstein: it already does.

15. But, to posit a clean break between organized labor and the Democratic Party one must first examine and understand the membership, activist infiltration, and cross fertilization of labor within both of the major political parties. Realizing the political and practical realities, one then understands why, with the significant help of organized labor, Democrat Al Gore won the 2000 presidential election by 543,895 votes (Federal Election Commission)—even while being out raised by his opponent \$185,921,855 to \$120,031,205 ([Open Secrets](#)).

16. The inescapable conclusion one can derive from Lichtenstein's final proposition: unless and until organized labor achieves its full potential, it will continue to suffer at the hands of those who profit from the manipulation of electoral federalism.

17. If labor is successful, then future workers will not have to carry a picket sign with the 21st century equivalent to 1968's "I am a man."

Works Cited

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