

from the struggles, alliances, and life-affirming practices of labouring people. Doing so, she argues, has the potential to “expand the imagination of both ecology and labour movements” (9) toward forms of environmentalism where workers matter.

By centering workers, their lived experiences, and their situated perspectives *Workers of the Earth* makes crucial contributions to labour debates in the age of climate change.

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Jeff Schuhrke, *Blue Collar Empire: The Untold Story of US Labor’s Global Anticommunist Crusade* (New York: Verso Books 2024)

IN THE OPENING pages of Jeff Schuhrke’s *Blue Collar Empire: The Untold Story of US Labor’s Global Anticommunist Crusade*, we encounter Jerry Wurf the newly elected and left-wing president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). It is 1964 and Wurf is coming to the union’s headquarters in Washington D.C. for the first time after an acrimonious election battle where he unseated Arnold Zander, a founding member. Wurf discovers that there are several unidentified men working out of the union’s International Relations Department on the fourth floor. He soon learns that they are CIA operatives who had been helping to finance anticommunist unions in Latin America since 1958. Wurf got rid of the operatives and rebuffed government requests to continue AFSCME collaboration with the CIA.

This anecdote frames much of Schuhrke’s analysis throughout the book. The virulent anticommunism of the AFL-CIO and many American labour leaders during the Cold War was very much a

choice and not simply a result of government interference or CIA perfidy. In fact, as Schuhrke shows, the AFL-CIO leadership could be even more bellicose than the U.S. government in its denunciation of the Soviet Union and its allies using the era of détente and the rise of Solidarność in Poland as prime examples.

Blue Collar Empire traces this anti-communism in a chronological fashion. Schuhrke highlights how in the early 20th century, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) leadership believed that capitalism so entrenched in America that its conservative business unionism was the only way forward. This led to support for President Woodrow Wilson and World War I. In a parallel to the end of the Cold War, the AFL found that the gains that it had made during the war by allying with the state were quickly reversed.

From there Schuhrke focuses on the post-World War II period where the anticommunist crusade really kicked into full gear. We meet infamous figures like Jay Lovestone and Irving Brown who played major roles in funding anticommunist unions and movements across the world and had significant ties to the CIA. There is also a major focus on the many pronouncements and political maneuvering of the AFL-CIO’s President George Meany and his successor Lane Kirkland. Schuhrke rightfully identifies their anti-communism as ultimately weakening the American labour movement. Meany was making anti-Soviet speeches as early as April 1945 when the U.S.-Soviet alliance was still in existence. By 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed, union density in the U.S. was in freefall. The preoccupation with anticommunism of figures like Meany and Kirkland was not simply a moral disaster with its support for right-wing dictatorships but even from a business unionist perspective it failed – unions were bleeding members and the jobs they held were lost.

The book's scope is its greatest strength but also leads to some weaknesses. The chronological order is clearly laid out. We get not just the well-known stories of attempts to weaken the Communist movements of France and Italy immediately after World War II, but a history of AFL-CIO involvement in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

In South Vietnam during escalating U.S. involvement in the war against the North, we encounter Tran Quoc Buu, the leader of the Vietnamese Confederation of Labour. Buu was a Buddhist anticommunist who was committed to improving conditions for workers and peasants. Understanding South Vietnamese individuals and perspectives is a welcome addition in this volume as it reflects the evolving historiography concerning the social history of the Republic of Vietnam from scholars like Nu-Anh Tran and Duy Lap Nguyen who stress that it was not simply some sort of perpetually unstable puppet state of France or later the U.S. but was seeking to build its own vision of the Vietnamese nation.

This attention to nuance can also be seen in the chapter on Africa. Schuhrke brings us the story of Maida Springer. She was an African-American woman who became the AFL-CIO's person on the ground in Africa but was not involved with the CIA. She was an anti-racist, anti-colonial, pan-African, and anticommunist activist. This won her both friends and enemies across the continent. While she strongly supported independence, her anticommunism sought to keep unions across the newly independent countries within the orbit of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). Even if these new African unions were not ideologically Marxist-Leninist many remained weary of the ICFTU as it was dominated by Western unions. While Springer could boast of some success in facilitating vocational training in

Kenya and Nigeria, hers is also a tragic story of what could have been if ideological divisions were not so hardened among labour leadership in the U.S.

At other times the broad scope of the book leaves important details overlooked. There were many very deep ideological splits stemming from the Russian Revolution that shaped the labour movements in countries like France and Italy. Further examination of these currents and how they interacted with American intervention could have given us a fuller picture. Strangely, AFL involvement in the Japanese labour movement in the 1950s is omitted. Lovestone's operative there, Richard L. G. Deverall, was an interesting figure that deserved attention. While the focus on individuals like Buu is helpful, sometimes trade unionists in the countries targeted by the AFL-CIO seem very passive and are nothing more than receivers of American training in the practices of business unionism.

There is also some questionable analysis. Schuhrke seems to suggest that U.S. antagonism towards Argentine President Juan Perón was in part due to his promotion of import substitution industrialization (ISI) which led to high tariffs on imported goods. However, scholars Sylvia Maxfield and James H. Nolt have noted that in the 1950s and 60s, the U.S. generally supported ISI in several countries including Argentina. Schuhrke also takes a curious approach to the issue of free trade. He generally repeats that it was primarily responsible for the loss of manufacturing jobs in the U.S., ignoring the issue of increased productivity through machines as well as work intensification as other explanations. While actually existing globalization privileges corporate rights and the free flow of capital, retreating to protectionism is often problematic. Many unions in the Global South are critical of the protectionist rhetoric emanating from unions in the Global North.

This issue has taken on an increased salience with the rise in economic nationalism we are seeing across the world right now. Though Schuhrke does cite the historian Dana Frank, who is critical of appeals to economic nationalism, this is an issue that could have used further interrogation especially in connection to building labour internationalism.

Overall, *Blue Collar Empire* is a welcome contribution to labour studies and history. It is an easy read that is written in a clear and straightforward style that is easy to follow along. While it will be of great use to academics and students, its importance is something beyond the academy. It is a book that should be read by young labour activists to avoid the disastrous mistakes of an earlier generation.

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Hamilton Nolan, *The Hammer: Power, Inequality, and the Struggle for the Soul of Labor* (New York: Hachette 2024)

“THIS IS A BOOK about how, and whether, the labor movement can save America. It is about the dizzying potential of organized labor, as well as the heartbreaking flaws that hold it back.” (8) This is how labour journalist Hamilton Nolan describes his first book, *The Hammer: Power, Inequality, and the Struggle for the Soul of Labor*. Though Nolan’s synopsis is a tad grandiose, it does capture the ambitions of the book. Through a series of vignettes recounting strikes, organizing drives, and door-knocking campaigns across the United States, *The Hammer* examines the yawning gap between workers’ growing desire for union representation and the lack of a commensurate response from America’s labour officialdom.

Nolan is no impartial observer. In 2015, he was centrally involved in organizing

journalists at the now-defunct online news site Gawker while employed as the latter’s “de facto labor reporter.” (3) Despite inspiring a subsequent wave of unionization at other digital media outlets, Gawker is better known for releasing a sex tape featuring former professional wrestler, Hulk Hogan, that elicited a Peter Thiel-funded lawsuit which eventually resulted in the publication’s bankruptcy. These days Nolan covers the labour beat for the left-wing magazine, *In These Times*, while also publishing a popular Substack, entitled “How Things Work.” He is among the young leftists in alternative media who found an audience covering labour and politics during and after the first Donald Trump administration.

The Hammer covers a wide breadth in its thirteen chapters. From child-care providers in California, to striking Nabisco workers in Portland, Oregon, *The Hammer* is a series of snapshots featuring workers across America vying for power where they have it. The book pays particular attention to often ill-fated organizing drives in the U.S. South, arguing that a revival of organized labour also requires reckoning with these right-to-work states. Many chapters feature on-the-ground interviews with workers leading uphill organizing drives at places like a Lowe’s hardware store in New Orleans or a biscuit restaurant in Elkville, West Virginia. These stories personalize the daunting power imbalance between corporate capital and its disorganized, low-wage workers, which highlights further the lamentable lack of support from the established labour movement. Chapters also spotlight pockets of worker power from which Nolan draws inspiration and seeks to illustrate the promise of reestablishing union power as a cornerstone of local economies. Chapter Three, for example, features leaders from the International Longshoreman’s Association at the port