

“Anti-Heroes of the Working Class”: A Response to Bruce Nelson¹

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The recent election of John Sweeney as head of the AFL-CIO provides an appropriate perspective from which to view Bruce Nelson's essay, "Class, Race and Democracy in the CIO". In accepting the position, Sweeney invoked principles that progressive unionists and labor supporters have long advocated. The AFL-CIO will commit unprecedented resources to organizing, recruit greater numbers of women and minorities to offices and organizing positions with the federation, adopt a strong, competitive and political edge to its policies and agendas, focus on neglected regions and sectors, and shore up the crumbling house of labor. If labor progressives are right, the new initiatives will open the door to a more democratic, egalitarian and successful labor movement in the near future. Following these declarations has come a renewed commitment to organize the South on a scale greater than or exceeding Operation Dixie and the creation, for the first time, of a Working Woman's Department headed by Karen Nussbaum, the founder of 9 to 5 and former head of the Women's Bureau.²

Sweeney comes to the office of AFL-CIO president from his leadership of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), currently one of the fastest growing unions in the United States. The SEIU has led the pack in innovative organizing strategies and strike tactics (for example, the Justice for Janitors campaign)³ and taken progressive stands on race and gender equality and immigration policy. These are, however, no simple top-down initiatives. Labor's rank and file, with a membership that is less white and more female than it has ever been in labor history, is making a difference in revitalizing democratic unionism. Without rank-and-file activism, there would have been no SEIU growth, little change in labor tactics, and certainly no new initiatives for the organization and recruitment of minority and women workers. Without the steady increase in women union members (they now constitute 37 per cent of the

¹ I would like to thank Paula Baker, Kathy Brown, Sue Cobble, Robert Gordon, Robert Jefferson, Chris Johnson, Peter Rachleff, Bonnie Smith, and Joe Turrini for their insights.

² *New York Times*, 20 February 1995; see also the programmatic pamphlet, *A New Voice for American Workers: A Summary of Proposals from Unions Supporting John J. Sweeney, Richard Trumka, and Linda Chavez-Thompson* (Washington, DC, 1995).

³ For the SEIU vision, see John J. Sweeney and Karen Nussbaum, *Solutions for the New Work Force: Policies for a New Social Contract* (Camp John, MD, Press, 1989); on Justice for Janitors, see Richard W. Hurd and William Rouse, "Progressive Union Organizing: The SEIU Justice for Janitors Campaign", *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 21:3 (1989), pp. 70-75.

membership and two of every three new members),⁴ there would be no hope of revitalizing labor. The growth in minority membership, while not as marked, has also contributed to the recent resurgence.⁵ Ironically, the opportunity for labor's rebirth has come from those segments of the labor force long excluded by union rules and discriminated against by the labor movement they supported.

I invoke the new policy initiatives of the AFL-CIO in part because it sets in relief the major themes in "Class, Race and Democracy in the CIO". In it, Nelson argues for a reconsideration of the new labor history in light of the "Wages of Whiteness". His argument has three aspects. First, Nelson rejects the equation between the "logic of experience" and working-class consciousness that informed much of the New Labor History, including his own work, and seeks to incorporate new evidence that the working class is not unitary.⁶ Second, Nelson surveys in a cursory fashion the racial consciousness of white workers (and, to an even lesser extent, black workers), as seen in the work of David Roediger and African-American historians.⁷ Finally, Nelson seeks to challenge the "tendency in the new labor history to see rank-and-file activism as an inherently progressive phenomenon" (p. 364) and to emphasize, instead, the relationship between a union leadership cadre with a "limited but real commitment to the cause of racial equality" (p. 367) and its reactionary rank and file. Pitting the celebration of grassroots activism in the new labor history against the "historical reality" of a mean-spirited, competitive and racist white working class, Nelson's analysis would have trouble explaining how recent initiatives of the AFL-CIO could emerge in an atmosphere of lower-class white resentment or why both leaders and rank-and-filers agree with the need for change.

To begin with, Nelson's chief targets for criticism are studies that appear under the rubric of the "new institutionalism".⁸ The culprits who

⁴ Roberta Spalter-Roth, Heidi Hartman and Nancy Collins, "What Do Unions Do For Women?", in Sheldon Friedman (ed.), *Restoring the Promise of American Labor Law*, (Ithaca, 1995), p. 195.

⁵ While their absolute numbers are relatively low, African-American men are the most highly unionized segment of the labor force; in 1992, 24 per cent of all African-American men employed in the non-agricultural labor force were unionized, compared to the general unionization rate of 16 per cent: US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Union Membership, 1992", *Monthly Labor Review*, 116 (March 1993), p. 2.

⁶ Challenges to the unitary conception of class predate recent studies of race; a useful perspective for labor history is that of Alice Kessler-Harris, "Treating the Male as Other": Redefining the Parameters of Labor History", *Labor History*, 34 (1993), pp. 190-204.

⁷ See David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1994); idem, *Towards an Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London, 1994), and the prolific citations for Nelson's essay, esp. note 1.

⁸ The "new institutionalism" was first used to describe developments in political science. -See Rogers M. Smith, "Political Jurisprudence, the 'New Institutionalism,' and the Future of Public Law", *American Political Science Review*, 82:1 (1988), pp. 89-108; James G.

romanticize the working class and, in Nelson's view, do not sufficiently confront its racism are those who are concerned with the fate of interracial unionism in a divided nation. In this case, the men under the gun (there are curiously few women's voices in this essay) are Michael Goldfield and Mike Honey,⁹ who recently have argued that the late 1930s and early 1940s provided a window for labor union progress on racial equality. Despite his general agreement that some progress was made, Nelson points to labor's post-war reaction and decline as evidence of deeply entrenched racism among the very workers who made "labor's forward march". When, as Nelson puts it, the new labor history met the wages of whiteness, there was hell to pay. Workers are unmasked as men vying primarily for "white skin" privilege in the workplace. Repenting of his former enthusiasm for "pentecostal" militancy,¹⁰ Nelson now suspects that, for the working class, racism is far more powerful than the need or practice of solidarity: housing riots, hate strikes, workplace discrimination and reactionary suburban politics provide his evidence.

Such an image of the white working class, unified within its own racial boundaries, is as distant from the complexities of the race question as the pronouncements of the most idealistic new labor historian. Arguably, Nelson has substituted a working class divided into black and white, or cadre and mass, for the unitary "working class" he critiques. Whatever his reservations, the cumulative effect of his analysis is to reinforce an image of a monolithic (now white and male) working class. His argument still accepts consciousness as the reflection of "the logic of experience", but the "experience" he now views as determinant is competition for jobs between races and a sexualized fear of the Other.¹¹

The race question in the CIO

The central purpose of Nelson's essay is not, however, to challenge the unitary conception of class that informs the new labor history but rather

March and Johan P. Olsen, "The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life", *American Political Science Review*, 78:3 (1984), pp. 734-749.

⁹ Michael Goldfield, "Race and the CIO: The Possibilities for Racial Egalitarianism during the 1930s and 1940s", *International Labor and Working Class History*, 44 (1993), pp. 1-32; Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana, 1994).

¹⁰ Bruce Nelson, "Pentecost on the Pacific: Maritime Workers and Working Class Consciousness in the 1930s", *Political Power and Social Theory*, 4 (1984), pp. 141-184.

¹¹ Nelson writes of the "white majority that has seen blacks not only as competitors for jobs and the often scarce resources of the larger society, but also as an alien phenomenon whose integration into the existing structures and subcultures of the white working class would be destabilizing and dangerous" (p. 367). Later in the essay, Nelson offers that the bipolar view of race is increasingly inappropriate; but for the most part, as he asserts, historians have treated African-American workers as the relevant reference group for the debate.

to ask why the CIO failed to achieve greater stability, membership and political influence in the post-war United States. When the United States emerged victorious from World War II, the labor movement was at the zenith of its power. Labor union membership had climbed to 15 million. Moreover, as Nelson writes, “the social dynamism of the new labor federation raised hope that it would help reshape the political environment and take the lead in building a social-democratic welfare state comparable to the model that eventually emerged in postwar Europe” (p. 354). Racial equality was never an important item on the agenda of social unionists, but it remained, according to Nelson, “integral”. Yet, while labor had acquired political clout, labor unions retreated from interracial unionism and racial equality to more calculated, pragmatic, and/or hostile racial politics. What happened?

The suspects for “Who Killed the Working Class” in the post-war period almost exceed the number of potential conspirators in the Kennedy assassination. Labor’s failure to create a third party, the Cold War, structural shifts in the economy, an employer offensive, congressional investigations into unAmerican activities and racketeering, conservative labor law reform, and bureaucratic unionism¹² have all been prime suspects. For Nelson, however, it is the rank and file itself that is suspect.

In Nelson’s account, labor’s two progressive initiatives – to organize the South and to direct the Democratic party toward social democracy – were scuttled primarily by the racism of white workers, North and South. Even as minority workers became more articulate and insistent about civil rights, the reactionary racism of the white majority resisted efforts both to combat job segregation by race and barriers to minority advancement into skilled jobs. Further, it opposed increasing minority representation on union governing boards. Similarly, the white working-class electorate defected from the Democratic party, in large part due to their own resentment of and opposition to a civil rights agenda. Nelson proceeds from this point to use illustrative examples of white racism and its capacity to limit and constrain leadership initiative.

Nelson’s most important case study of working-class racism is the United Auto Workers (UAW). During and after World War II, he argues, the automobile industry was characterized by intermittent hate

¹² This is an argument Nelson neglects entirely, except to comment on older analyses that laid racism at the employer’s door. For the employer assault, see Howell Harris, *The Right to Manage: Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s* (Madison, 1982); Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–1960* (Urbana, 1995); Gilbert Gall, *The Politics of the Right to Work* (Westport, 1988). For examples of the cultural assault on organized labor, see Donald R. Richberg, *Labor Union Monopoly* (Chicago, 1957); John L. McClellan, *Crime Without Punishment* (New York, 1962), and regular labor coverage in *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report*.

strikes, job segregation and promotional discrimination by race, and resistance to the civil rights agenda, all of which reflected the depth of racism among the white rank and file. Nelson's most controversial and interesting evidence comes from the pathbreaking work of Thomas Sugrue on neighborhood associations and resistance to liberal housing policies in Detroit. With its industrial base in the auto industry, Detroit was one of the most residentially segregated urban areas in the United States and a breeding ground for racial conflict. High rates of white outmigration, political opposition to and extralegal violence against integration, the proliferation of homeowners' protective associations, and electoral shifts to the right all evoke an atmosphere pervaded with white majority racism.¹³

The problem was and is that the available data do not distinguish middle-class from working-class resistance or provide a basis for analyzing the impact of structural shifts in the industrial labor force (the fastest growing job categories in the automobile industry as elsewhere were white-collar clerical and managerial workers).¹⁴ Further, Detroit's suburbs were not just working class. Sugrue's supporting evidence does not take into account the methodological weaknesses of his principal survey data (to begin with, the 1951 survey used income differentials as the chief determinant of class). These weaknesses raise questions about accepting any single equation between the union rank and file and the racist turn of Detroit politics.

Rethinking the relationship between racial politics and the fate of labor, we should consider how the category of "working class" became redefined in the post-war period. Judgements about the virulence of white working-class men's resentment and their presumably racist and sexist politics, for example, might be tempered with the realization that no one knows who the working class is any more. Even apart from racial and gender divisions, the "working class" is not and never was unitary; segments of it have historically been more comfortable identifying with the middle class. As Sugrue notes, many workers in the post-war era started to see themselves as homeowners and therefore middle class.¹⁵ The division of waged and salaried workers into homeowners and renters undoubtedly had an impact on union solidarity. Further, Detroit workers

¹³ Thomas Sugrue, "Crabgrass Politics: Race, Rights, and the Reaction Against Liberalism in the Urban North, 1940–1964", *Journal of American History*, 82:2 (1995), pp. 55–79.

¹⁴ On structural sectoral and occupational shifts in the labor force, the consequences for labor were known as early as the 1950s, but the news hasn't reached some historians yet. See Daniel Bell, "The Next American Labor Movement", *Fortune* (April 1953); idem, "Prospects for Union Growth", in Walter Fogel and Archive Kleingartner (eds), *Contemporary Labor Issues* (Belmont, CA, 1966), pp. 225–238; see also idem, *The End of Ideology, On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the 1950s* (Glencoe, IL, 1960); Sidney Lens, *The Crisis in American Labor* (New York, 1959); Irving Bernstein, "The Growth of American Labor Unions", *Labor History*, 2:2 (1961), pp. 131–157.

¹⁵ Sugrue, "Crabgrass Politics".

witnessed not only the flight of middle- and working-class families to the suburbs but the migration of factories as well.

The brief interlude of working-class prosperity between the end of World War II and the 1970s was riddled with economic uncertainty, not just for what would happen but what was happening. The base of union power, and the underpinnings of union leaders' political influence, was eroding before they had time to employ it. Even working-class families with a male union wage began to require a second wage-earner to maintain their standard of living; the secondary wage-earner was most often the woman of the household. The petulance around the domestic sanctity and racial integrity of neighborhoods reflected the new economic assault on single-wage-earner households, troubled times both for and within families that working-class men and women shared with their middle-class counterparts.

Cadres and masses

What is at stake in Nelson's argument is the character, need for, and efficacy of working-class labor militancy. Are grassroots labor organizing and "spontaneous" collective action to be trusted in a world where working-class collective action sometimes aims to enforce racial inequality? Who is responsible for the institutional racism of the labor movement? To what extent are the needs and strategies of organized capital or union bureaucracy at fault? Echoing David Brody in his dismissal of community-based unionism, Nelson asserts a reactionary working class, even with its occasional militancy, as the problem. Union leadership was, in his view, far-seeing but quirkily disabled by rank-and-file resistance.¹⁶ Without modification, Nelson argues that "when we take race into account, the unionism of the white rank and file seldom looks progressive, and 'rank-and-file democracy' often becomes a means of protecting the position of the white majority against perceived threats from the black minority" (p. 364). Against those enamored of rank-and-file self-activity, Nelson pits an equally extreme view of workers who cannot cooperate or even interact across the racial divide.

To prove his case, Nelson returns to the new labor history and the UAW for another model, that of Peter Friedlander's book, *The Emergence of a UAW Local*.¹⁷ Friedlander's major question concerns the relationship between the cadre of militants that builds and subsequently leads the union and the masses who enter into the union and transform it through their social conservatism and shop-floor militancy. In

¹⁶ David Brody, "The CIO After Fifty Years; A Historical Reckoning", *Dissent* (Fall 1985), pp. 457-472; see also his *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle* (New York, 1980).

¹⁷ Peter Friedlander, *The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936-1939: A Study in Class and Culture* (Pittsburgh, 1975).

Friedlander's study, cadres could and did instigate radical organizing and even transform individual workplaces. Unfortunately, they ran repeatedly into grassroots resistance to change. In many ways, Bruce Nelson's first book, *Workers on the Waterfront*,¹⁸ echoed the same theme in its study of west coast longshoremen. Headed by the legendary Harry Bridges, the leadership cadre of the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) successfully organized the waterfront during the Great Depression and even converted some of its members to internationalist trade unionism. At the same time, the ILWU was clearly divided between its conservative and radical syndicalist wings. Nearly ten years later, Nelson has changed his mind only in emphasis. According to his new research, even solidarity at the point of production and a broad internationalism could not change the consciousness of a hopelessly racist white working class. Cadres might and did try leading the unruly masses, but they could only go so far. The racial egalitarianism of labor leaders collapsed in the face of rank-and-file opposition.

Nelson's argument has the effect of acknowledging the destructive effects of working-class racism while it neatly preserves the CIO's reputation for racial equality. As he suggests, future studies would "likely reinforce the emerging portrait of a leadership with a limited but real commitment to the cause of racial equality and a white majority that has seen blacks not only as competitors for jobs [. . .] but also as an alien phenomenon [. . .]" (p. 367). The question is how one establishes responsibility for the unequal outcome of union practices. Was it simply working-class reactionaries among the rank and file, or did racial and gender inequality stem from the unevenness in and even lapse of union leaders' political commitments?

To weigh these factors, we might turn to another mass working-class institution of the post-war period – the United States Army. The Army provides a reasonable parallel to the labor movement, since it was disproportionately working class in membership; it also offers a rather appropriate analogy, given labor historians' use of military metaphors to describe working-class collective action. Before 1947, the Army was a completely segregated, highly centralized, and hierarchically governed institution. During the Truman administration, as the defense department actively desegregated army units, the Army became arguably one of the most integrated and racially progressive institutions in American life. Desegregation was brought about by both a rhetorical commitment to progress as well as an understanding of what an increasingly minority and later volunteer army had to offer. In neither case, before or after the decision to desegregate, were working-class soldiers asked to choose between policies of racial discrimination or equality. Whatever informal

¹⁸ Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana, 1988).

practices of racial discrimination and harassment continued, the post-war Army enforced the new policy from the top down. There was little resistance.¹⁹ This outcome cannot be explained by arguments that posit bureaucracies or even enlightened cadres held hostage by the will and whim of an unenlightened mass.

Union bureaucrats and militant leadership no less than workers were the products of a class and a culture pervaded with racist prejudice and protective of racial discrimination. Some labor leaders clearly overcame such prejudice to advocate racial equality, defend civil rights and promote the welfare of minority workers. Others, however, embraced racist attitudes and practices attributed to the working class and society as a whole. On the issue of gender, they proved considerably less malleable, as Nelson admits, but overall both race and gender identity of labor leaders shaped their perspective. Moreover, union leaders, like other administrators, came to acquire their own vested institutional interests, an attribute that does not jell with Nelson's curiously disinterested labor elite. Institutional survival certainly counted. To some extent, leaders had to reflect the will, however reactionary, of the majority; but leaders were also attentive to how they might best preserve their position and influence against both majority and minority demands. Few union leaders sought to return to the shop floor after their years in union service, and most believed that they, not the rank and file, knew the best course to take. Union democracy, which occasionally allows for the election of newcomers to leadership, more often than not produced a reign of incumbents and the subsequent delegitimation of dissent.²⁰

What seemed to move union leaders to action was precisely the grassroots militancy that Nelson castigates, a militancy that could stem from either majority and minority activism. By World War II, minority and women workers were an increasingly visible presence in the labor movement, due in large part to the changing composition of the labor force and its industrial and regional variability. Union efforts for racial and gender equality were thus shaped by the demands of a "strategic plurality"²¹ for change, because failure to incorporate minority workers

¹⁹ The "New Men of Power" in the labor movement may not have had the power of court-martial to force workers to behave themselves, but they did have a number of sanctions at their disposal. On the desegregation of the armed forces and racial attitudes, see Richard Dalfiume, *The Desegregation of the Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts, 1939-1953* (Columbia, 1969).

²⁰ Elizabeth Faue, "Paths of Unionization: Community, Bureaucracy, and Gender in the Minneapolis Labor Movement, 1935-1945", in Ava Baron (ed.), *Work Engendered: Toward a New Labor History*, (Ithaca, 1991), pp. 296-319.

²¹ Elizabeth Faue, Comment, "Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Industrial Unions" panel, Rethinking American Labor History: Gender, Race, and Class conference, State Historical Society of Wisconsin and Department of History, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 10 April 1992. See also Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York, 1977), for a similar argument about the need to balance the numbers.

meant the failure of the union. The threshold seems to have been about 35 or 40 per cent. Where African-American workers reached that threshold – as they did, for example, in the packinghouse industry, unions understood the strategic necessity of integrating them into leadership positions. Similarly, the electrical workers adopted a more egalitarian policy toward women workers, advocating equal pay and promoting women leaders, in large part because the industry's labor force was about 40 per cent female.²² Where the numbers fell below this mark (as did African-American workers in the automobile industry, where they constituted about 7 per cent of the industry labor force in 1945 and only 20 per cent in 1963), unions took a far more rhetorical pose in the cause of equality. Equally important, where women – and minority or immigrant – workers exceeded the strategic marker (as in the numerical dominance but effective marginality of women in the garment workers' union), union men actively opposed their having an equal voice.²³

The conditions under which African-American men and all women pressed their claims for equality confirms this insight. The strategic plurality (and, as Nelson himself notes, the location) of African Americans in the packinghouse industry made their recruitment vital to the success of organizing drives. Given the convergence of strategic necessity with union commitment to racial equality and interracial unity, it was also a foregone conclusion.²⁴ In contrast, the automobile industry numbers did not support the same program, as marginalized African-American

²² Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (Urbana, 1987), compares policies toward women in the automobile and electrical industries. While her argument is oriented toward other questions, the difference in proportion of women in each industry's labor force can be used to explain major differences in union attitudes toward gender equality. For the post-war period, and the impact of McCarthyism on reinforcing women's equal place, see Lisa Kannenberg, "The Impact of the Cold War on Women's Trade Unionism: The UE Experience", *Labor History*, 34 (1993), pp. 309–323.

²³ This can be seen in the cases both of garment workers and in the hotel and restaurant workers, where twentieth-century shifts in the waitperson labor force led to gerrymandering, including the development of separate women's locals. See Alice Kessler-Harris, "Problems of Coalition-Building: Women and Trade Unions in the 1920s", in Ruth Milkman (ed.), *Women, Work and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labor History* (Boston, 1985), pp. 110–138; Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, 1992).

²⁴ Nelson refers here to a specific case study; see Rick Halpern, "Interracial Unionism in the Southwest: Fort Worth's Packinghouse Workers, 1936–1954", in Robert Zieger (ed.), *Organized Labor in the Twentieth Century South* (Knoxville, 1991), pp. 158–182; see also his *Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago's Packinghouses, 1920–1960* (Urbana, forthcoming); Roger Horowitz, "'Without a Union, We're All Lost': Ethnicity, Race, and Unionism among Kansas City Packinghouse Workers, 1930–1941", presented at Rethinking American Labor History: Gender, Race, and Class conference, State Historical Society of Wisconsin and Department of History, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 10 April 1992.

workers were kept from skilled positions and actively discriminated against as local unions struggled to maintain the color bar. Exceptions were precisely in those firms and regions where African Americans constituted a sizeable plurality of the labor force, as they did at Ford's Detroit Rouge plant. Only the active intervention of outside forces – not only of the national union but of the NAACP, the Urban League, and the federal government – broke down race segregation on the shop floor and in seniority lists. Even then, regional variance in the racial composition and history of the labor force made a difference in the implementation of federal laws. Finally, the position of women in the packinghouse industry provides contrasting outcomes. Some local leaders took an actively egalitarian stance (wherever strategic pluralities existed), and others chose confrontation (where numbers fell short).²⁵

The International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, originally founded by skilled male workers in the needle trades provides an example of how numbers might have an adverse effect on the inclusion and position of women and minority workers in the labor movement. The ILGWU was literally overwhelmed by the wave of new women members in the massive garment strikes of 1909–1915 and later in 1934. Accounting for only one in six or one in ten members, skilled male craft unionists used the machinery of bureaucracy, the advantage of incumbency, and the definition of and qualifications for holding office as a means of retaining control of the union in an industry where the labor force ranged from between 75 and 90 per cent female. Women did vote regularly for men as union officials, but the rules of governance already biased the process toward the election of men nominated by the union's male officers. Until quite recently, the executive board of the ILGWU remained overwhelmingly male. Only on local and regional boards did women make up a significant proportion of officers.²⁶ Nelson writes that "In explaining the alleged conservatism of the leadership of organized labor in relation to questions of race, one must look first to the attitudes and behavior of labor's white rank-and-file majority and to the kind of racialized democracy it practiced" (p. 364). What the evidence of labor history suggests is quite the opposite; the responsibility for the failure to recruit women workers and minority workers rested squarely in the hands of national labor leaders practicing their own brand of gender-defined and racially-limited democracy.²⁷

²⁵ Kevin Boyle, "There are No Union Sorrows that the Union Can't Heal": The Struggle for Racial Equality in the United States Automobile Industry, 1945–1960", *Labor History*, 36 (1995), pp. 5–23; Bruce Fehn, "Chickens Come Home to Roost": Industrial Reorganization, Seniority, and Gender Conflict in the United Packinghouse Workers of America, 1955–1966", *Labor History*, 34 (1993), pp. 324–341; Dennis Deslippe, "We Had an Awful Time with our Women": Iowa's United Packinghouse Workers of America, 1945–1975", *Journal of Women's History*, 5:1 (1993), pp. 10–32.

²⁶ Kessler-Harris, "Problems of Coalition-Building"; Faue, "Paths of Unionization".

²⁷ This is to parallel Nelson's construction of a "racialized" democracy.

Any institutionalized practice of racism, whether the construction of separate seniority lists or the failure to recognize and appoint minority men and women to union office, is the responsibility of leadership. That is not to deny working-class racism; rather, it is to acknowledge the pervasive racism in our society and the vested interests of labor leaders. In his recent biography of Walter Reuther, Nelson Lichtenstein retells a familiar story of a lapse in racial egalitarianism among UAW leaders. In 1959 Horace Sheffield and the Trade Union Leadership Council sought to have African-American representation on the UAW Executive Board. Reuther originally decried the effort as mere tokenism, without, however, suggesting alternative solutions. Even pressure from the TULC and other civil rights organizations could not move Reuther. In the end, he met the contradictory pulls of civil rights and racial conservatism among union officers by electing his own minority candidate at the same time as he enlarged the executive board.²⁸ Such actions revealed the union's ambivalence in matters of race. As Lichtenstein writes, Reuther did not brook dissent of any kind, nor did he ever (unlike his brothers) "cultivate[] personal friendship with any African American" in his union or without.²⁹ Labor leaders perpetuated an all-white (and all-male) leadership until forced to change; working-class attitudes only partly explained their actions.

Nelson's argument that "the great majority of white workers were unwilling to unite with African Americans around a program that would have challenged deeply-rooted patterns of racial inequality" (p. 357) thus misses a crucial dynamic between bureaucratic unionism and increasing resistance to demands for equal rights. When the Depression provided an opportunity to reopen lines of interracial communication and cooperation, what did unions do? To what extent did the CIO choose, except as a necessary condition for organizing, responsibilities for racism in "the larger society"; how did the priority of workplace concerns undermine initiatives for race and gender equality; and what were the constraints and limitations of CIO leaders on matters of race? In effect, union leaders circled their wagons. While black working men received some union offices at the national level, they – like women of all races – were most often to be found active in local communities, neighborhoods and workplaces. A glass ceiling existed between women and minority activists and national leaders that grassroots racial and gender prejudices cannot explain or rectify.

Bureaucracy and community

What Nelson's argument shows us in the end are the shortcomings of labor's reliance on national initiatives and centralized authority alone in

²⁸ Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York, 1995), pp. 370–381.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

combating race and gender discrimination. If local unions and city labor federations sometimes did express or accede to working-class racism and racial/ethnic and gender discrimination, there was no necessary equation between rank-and-file militancy and racism. At times, local union leaders could and did respond to the changing composition of the labor force and incorporate new members faster and more efficiently than national ones; they also, given the right circumstances, could provide an ideal space for education in democracy and equality. Further, leaders as well as followers could and can be racist. Institutionalized racism, for one, cannot occur without the complicity of those who govern the institutions, recruit members, decide on organizing priorities, or appoint, nominate and elect officers.

With leaders far removed from the shop floor and the local union hall, national unions would have difficulty being schools for mass education on race and gender equality or democracy. By the 1940s, CIO union leadership did not take seriously racism beyond the workplace and indeed colluded with local unions in resistance to an agenda of racial equality. The experience of Communist and non-racist CIO unionists who sought to establish anti-racism as a central issue in southern organizing drives demonstrated the infeasibility of the CIO's and Communist party's top-down attempts to change racial segregation in the workplace without dealing at the same time with community issues. Ira Katznelson has suggested that the multiracial American working class solved the problem of class solidarity by being workers at work and ethnics at home.³⁰ Clearly, this divide informed union policy and practice. Yet, as Earl Lewis has subsequently reminded us, those barriers were humanly made and constructed and could be taken down, reestablished, or eliminated at the grassroots level; the boundaries were permeable.³¹ What this suggests is that any unionist or labor historian who would seriously engage race and weigh its consequences must take on the divide in labor history between workplace and community and between work- or production-based militancy and activism located in the realm of social reproduction, to challenge in effect the divide between home and work. Currently, the organizing of the most successful unions, from the SEIU to AFSCME, confirms that strategy.

In his essay, "Class, Race and Democracy in the CIO", Bruce Nelson sets out for readers and practitioners of the new labor history an ambitious agenda that challenges the unitary category of class and attempts to acknowledge the impact of working-class racism on the fate of the CIO. In his admirable survey of problems and evidence, he opens

³⁰ Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights*; Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches: Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States* (Chicago, 1981).

³¹ Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk* (Berkeley, 1991).

the door for further debate about the connection between organized labor and working-class communities, urban politics, cadres and masses, and the democratic process. Although Nelson only notes it in passing, such an inquiry also requires understanding how gender plays into the fate of race, class and democracy in the labor movement, a position I illustrate here more than argue. In particular, labor historians could explore what men (and it is mostly male-dominated industries at the heart of the debate) have invested in their racial identities that goes beyond the mere calculation of economic gain and loss. Similarly, the recognition that gender identity is intertwined in racial politics would illuminate his arguments. The experience of women might also suggest what Nelson argues here about African-American workers in the CIO: they experienced the CIO in vastly different ways from white (male) workers. It is equally important to recognize that both minority working men and women workers of all social groups were an integral part of the "rank and file" and not its Other; their experiences should be weighed into any evaluation of rank-and-file insurgency and working-class democracy.

To the extent that strategy – or purely pragmatic considerations – seems to overrule generosity, these are pessimistic readings of the fate of racial and gender equality in the CIO and in labor history. There seems no doubt, on the one hand, that "good will" does count for something. The CIO's call for "organizing the unorganized" admitted no impediment and allowed no obstacle to the organization of women, African-American and ethnic workers. But the very unevenness of labor's commitment to equality – its astounding success in integrating ethnic workers, the lesser integration of African-American workers, and "bare bones" in the organization of women (also a function of CIO organizing priorities) – suggests that something beyond "good will" was at work. At the very least, recent case studies underline what has become almost a truism in women's history and African-American history: disadvantaged groups in society – marginalized through custom, historic and contemporary prejudice and practice and subordinated even in the realm of "progressive" politics – had to have an independent voice to effect change and press the issues of equality and justice. The AFL-CIO could not and cannot be depended upon to foster racial and gender equality by itself; it is motivated and sustained in its efforts by autonomous departments and groups such as the Trade Union Leadership Council and the Coalition of Trade Union Women.³²

Finally, recent studies suggest that the problems of race, class, gender and democracy in the labor movement were and are complex. While

³² For another case of this, consider the salutary impact of the woman's department of the UAW on the union's eventual acceptance of policies supporting gender equality; the department was one of the prime movers in the formation of CLUW as well. See Nancy

we have documented evidence of racism in working-class self-activity at the local level, so too has it been possible to fight racism in working-class organizations, factories and communities. National union leadership could not and cannot simply impose its will, whether racially egalitarian or racist, on the rank and file. Workforces integrated by both race and gender can provide opportunities for labor organizing as well as union-busting; and the strategic number as well as location of marginalized workers was and is a central factor in determining the possibilities for racial and gender inclusion and equality. It should no longer be possible to limit the debate as to whether labor leaders or rank-and-file workers were primarily to blame for the failure of the labor movement and class solidarity. Efforts to promote racial and gender equality and broad-based democracy in the labor movement must come at all levels; the labor movement's revitalization depends on it.

Progressive scholars interested in labor's present fortunes now perceive that the labor movement has turned a corner on the issues of race and gender equality. The new AFL-CIO initiatives are harbingers of that change. While the politics of resentment fuel the militia movement and right-wing politics, labor finally has to incorporate an emerging labor force and union membership that are increasingly minority and female, growing class divisions, and ever-blurrier distinctions between home and work. Those changes, and the accompanying awareness and militancy of ordinary workers, must affect not only the way labor proceeds but how we as scholars come to evaluate and understand the role of race and labor. To the extent that Bruce Nelson engages us in the question of race, class and gender in the making of industrial union democracy, he is to be commended. It is our responsibility to carry on the dialogue from here.