

Labor's Home Front: The American Federation of Labor during World War II. By Andrew E. Kersten. New York: New York University Press, 2006. xiii + 274. \$42.00 cloth.

Labor historians tend to be passionate scholars, drawn to topics that highlight some long-forgotten promise of a more egalitarian America, point to the wickedness of corporations and their political lackeys, or measure the stances of white- and male-dominated trade unions toward women, African Americans, and others considered to be outsiders. Consequently, topics that do not stir passions or lend themselves to easy categorization as good or bad are given short shrift, no matter how important they are for an understanding of the history of the American labor movement or the experiences of the nation's working class. There is no better example of this than the neglect of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which, from shortly after its inception in 1886 until its merger with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1955, was a collection of mostly conservative, anti-statist, anti-immigrant, racist, and patriarchal trade unions that did more to improve the lot of American workers and their families than any other organization. Therefore, the mere publication of Andrew Kersten's study of the AFL during the second world war is a cause for celebration—that the book is smart and insightful makes it even better.

The AFL's structure—a loose federation of scores of independent trade unions—presents difficulties for those scholars who actually address the subject: does one focus on the AFL's officers, the leadership of constituent unions, or rank-and-file members? Kersten solves this problem by providing an overview of national AFL mobilization policies and activities before moving on to case studies that highlight the interplay of rank-and-file trade unionists with their unions and the AFL's leadership.

Kersten argues that the AFL leadership's work in the nation's war mobilization, government-sponsored agreements to maintain labor peace in return for managerial concessions, efforts of employer groups to take advantage of the war to pass open-shop laws, and debates over postwar economic planning transformed the political orientation of the AFL. Before the war, the AFL leadership and most of its constituent unions insisted that governments—both state and federal—should stay out of labor relations, fearing that if governments were to intervene they would do so on the side of capital and management. But labor's experience with the Roosevelt administration during the war convinced the AFL's leaders that government intervention was inevitable and could be

beneficial to organized labor. By the end of the war, Kersten maintains, the AFL had joined the CIO in the New Deal coalition even though the rivalry between the two houses of labor would continue for another decade.

There were limits to change within the AFL, though. Kersten presents case studies of rank-and-file trade unionists' successes in ensuring that high-paying jobs went to white men and relegating both women and African Americans to second-class status on the workplace floor. While the AFL leadership made half-hearted attempts to open trade union membership (and thus jobs in closed shops) to women and African Americans for the sake of increased war production, the rank-and-file fought to maintain their traditions of exclusivity. Many of these trade unionists were so zealous in guarding their prerogatives that they would halt production of vital war materiel rather than allow African Americans or women access to jobs.

The most fascinating and problematic of Kersten's case studies deals with the AFL leadership's unwillingness to confront the growing problem of workplace safety. The demands of war production—tight schedules, around-the-clock operations, and compulsory overtime—led to increases in industrial accidents that killed or maimed hundreds of thousands of American workers and slowed war production. In fact, during the first sixteen and a half months of the war, more Americans died in industrial accidents (nearly 20,000) than in the armed forces (12,123). Kersten faults the AFL's leadership for simply insisting that management was obligated to provide a safe workplace. But this stance is not surprising. For the AFL's leadership to have addressed workplace safety would have encroached upon the prerogatives of individual unions, which traditionally dealt with shop floor issues.

By placing the AFL at the center of both the American labor movement and the nation's efforts to produce the material that defeated the Axis powers, *Labor's Home Front* is a welcome addition to the literature looking at the interplay of race, gender, and class in the politics of mid-twentieth-century America. We can hope it will not be the last word. The case study method that Kersten rightly employs for the first scholarly foray into the subject since the 1950s is not necessarily the best methodology for subsequent efforts; case studies of the activities of a particular union local are too narrowly focused to stand for the actions of the entire union, let alone the AFL. This fine book should thus be a starting point for further study.

—Michael Pierce, University of Arkansas