

Book Review

Andrew Kolin (2016) *Political Economy of Labor Repression in the United States*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. ISBN 9781498524049. 398 pp. \$120 (hardcover), \$55 (paperback).

*Reviewed by
Dave Kamper, United Auto Workers Local 1981, United States of America*

This book is an ambitious attempt to tell the whole story of the conflict between labour and capital from the earliest days of the United States to the present. Its central argument is that the labour/capital conflict is often expressed through the formation and transformation of social institutions. As economic realities change, and as workers find new ways to unite and spread their voice, the forces of capitalism make use of or modify social institutions – government, the press, workplaces themselves – to make it possible to repress labour more successfully.

Ambitious as the book is, it is unsuccessful in achieving its goals. The central argument of *Political Economy of Labor Repression in the United States* is certainly a persuasive one but it is hardly original. It is no surprise that efforts by the have-nots to organise against the haves are opposed by the haves; 'twas ever thus. This is not a work of original research, so its presumed purpose is to serve as either a textbook or an overview of the subject for general readers. Several critical flaws, however, render it unsuitable for these purposes.

First, for what is primarily a work of history, the book's historical grounding is thin, dated and incomplete. To take just one example, the author spends a great deal of time in Chapters 7 and 8 discussing the role of Communists in labour unions in the 1930s and 1940s, but relies almost entirely on secondary works published before the end of the Cold War in 1991 opened up Soviet archives to American researchers. As such, the author misses so much of the great insights that historians like Randi Storch have brought to the subject.

This is just one of the many ways in which this book is not aware of, and therefore does not speak to, the myriad works on labour history from the last three decades. This reviewer does not wish to be unduly harsh, but it is inexcusable to write about the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the Pacific Northwest without referencing the work of Erik Loomis (2016), about Communist organising without the work of Robin D.G. Kelley (1990), about twentieth-century women's labour without Dorothy Sue Cobble (2004), or the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) without Joseph McCartin (2011). The author's main source of quotations for labour history are the magisterial volumes of Phillip Foner, the first of which was published in the late 1940s. Too much good work has been done in the years since they were published, though, for those works to be the author's go-to for historical narrative.

The result is an historical analysis that frequently does not pass muster. The author seems determined, for example, to make financial speculators the driving force behind the replacement of the Articles of Confederation with the US Constitution, when the wealthiest people in the country were plantation owners whose wealth was derived from slavery (Chapter 2). Kolin seems utterly perplexed about the motives and intentions of the Gompers-led American Federation of Labour (AFL), contradicting himself from one chapter to the next. At one point he states, "AFL

actions centered on reforming the economy through legislation ... [including] legislation to shorten the workday” (p. 73), but later he argues that a key tenet of the AFL’s philosophy was “rejecting any association with, or regulation by, the U.S. government” (p. 105). (In fairness, the AFL remains a mystery to many, but that is precisely why one needs to engage with the ongoing scholarship.) He falls prey, in Chapter 3 and elsewhere, to the common temptation to look at the cultural impact of the IWW and assume that the organisation had a similar political impact on the labour movement. And the book is full of minor errors that grate: there was no such thing as “the Alien Sedition Act” (p. 56); rather, there were four different laws known together as “the Alien and Sedition Acts”. And the famous campaign-finance case before the Supreme Court was *Buckley v Valeo*, not *Valero* (p. 354).

This first flaw compounds the second, which is that the book too readily ascribes monolithic views and purposes to both capitalists and workers in a way that is deeply reductionist and imprecise. In chapter after chapter we read about how “Capital” wanted to repress labour. I suppose that’s true insofar as it goes, but lumping all capitalists together in such a fashion misses opportunities to dig more deeply into the dynamics of America’s economic structures.

Similarly, the author is fully committed to a view of labour that contrasts radical workers with conservative union leaders. This is a trope often used by labour reformers and writers today, and it has some value in specific contexts, but is at best a hasty generalisation when applied to all of American history. It also leads to an historical analysis that overstates the role of anti-communism in internal union debates; yes, it was a factor, but there were so many other issues at play that an excessive emphasis on anti-communism becomes less than helpful.

This reviewer is reluctant to apply labels, but the author’s insistence, throughout the book, on treating Capital and Labour as Platonic ideals is the kind of surface Marxian analysis, an economic determinism, that explains little and disguises much. It would be one thing if the author was making a theoretical argument that these labels are of sufficient value to be worth using, but this work does not engage at all with any theories from history or political science on class formation, labour union dynamics, the capital/labour conflict or the structures of capitalist societies.

Third, and most significantly, this book’s deepest flaw is its stubborn refusal to engage with issues of racism, sexism and xenophobia as phenomena that exist independent of class dynamics in the United States (and the world). The absence of these issues from the text is so striking that it almost reads like parody. For instance, in Chapter 3 Kolin repeatedly states that antebellum wage labour and chattel slavery were, for all practical purposes, the same thing. This reviewer laughed aloud.

Kolin’s working class is exclusively white and male, and he seems blithely unconcerned about this. When other people (i.e., the overwhelming majority of workers) are mentioned, it is purely in economic terms. Racism and sexism were just tools to keep wage rates low. Xenophobia barely gets a mention, because the only immigrants considered by Kolin are European. How one can write about the early years of the AFL, for example, without mentioning the Chinese Exclusion Act is beyond this reviewer’s comprehension.

Again, there was a time, perhaps three or four decades ago, when respectable scholars treated issues of identity in this light, but this is no longer acceptable for an academic work. The racism of the white working class in American history is not some by-product of capitalist exploitation. The sexism of labour unions was and is a huge barrier to progress and one of the worst ways that labour has shot itself in the foot. It is not something foisted upon the working class by scheming capitalists. Anti-immigrant feeling, then and now, is endemic in the white working class and has done much to weaken organised labour.

It is genuinely difficult for me to understand how one-time United Auto Workers (UAW) Vice-President Wyndham Mortimer manages three separate mentions in this book, but A. Philip Randolph, who led the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters for forty years and was a significant figure in the civil rights movement, doesn't appear once. Or how Kolin can devote several pages to the Taft–Hartley Act of 1947 (p. 255 *et seq.*) without once acknowledging a prime reason that this anti-union legislation passed was a fear on the part of Southern Democrats that unions would organise African-Americans and threaten the political supremacy of whites in Dixie. Or how one can entirely ignore the persistent efforts by craft unions to exclude women from their ranks, and how union culture as a result was explicitly masculine in tone and substance.

Racism, sexism and xenophobia are not sideshows in American labour history. To treat them as such is tantamount to academic malpractice. This reviewer despises using such a harsh tone, but there is no avoiding it.

It is because of these flaws that this reviewer cannot recommend this book in any capacity.

REFERENCES

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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