BOOK REVIEW

☐ Mike Hirsch

Steelworkers Rank and File

The Political Economy of a Union Reform Movement

by Phillip W. Nyden

Phil Nyden has established a reputation as a scholar with a deep personal commitment to the prospects of a genuine, grass-roots-based militant unionism. With a sensitivity too rare among outside observers, Nyden tries to draw lessons based on the actual experiences of the rank-and-file, in terms of how they understand their situation and the strategies they develop. While this book is not without its problems, it represents must reading for union activists as well as labor educators, researchers and friends of the labor movement.

The book also fills a gap in the political analysis of industrial unionism. Too many studies of union politics base their models on industrial relations in the auto industry and the internal dynamics of the UAW. Only two books have dealt with steelworker politics; while required reading [both are out of print] neither is concerned with rank-and-file movements.

Lloyd Ulman's *The Government of the Steel Workers' Union* (1962) is an exhaustive study of the centralization of leadership in the International Executive Board; based on secondary sources and convention proceedings, it concludes before the 1959 strike. John Herling's *Right to Challenge* (1972) covers the historical period from the founding of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) to the Emil Narick challenge in 1969. Less analytical than Ulman or Nyden, Herling's work remains the standard history of steel union politics by presenting a balanced, if somewhat vague, picture of the causes of union political upsurges. Nyden's new work is both a contribution to and a significant advance over those of Ulman and Heling, and more generally contributes to an understanding of union and working-class political mobilizations.

Nyden subtitles his book, "The Political Economy of a Union Reform Movement," because of the need to understand "the broad social, economic and political factors *outside* of an organization which

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can inhibit or at least influence the development of rank-and-file movements." He analyzes the reform hopes of steelworker militants and their realistic possibilities in the specific historical contexts of post-war industrial boom and centralized union-management relations. Diverse business strategies—involving domestic and foreign competition, mergers, diversification into non-steel and non-areas, industrial areas, investment in new technology, and collaboration or conflict with pliable labor leaders—have an effect on labor relations and rank-and-file predispositions, shaping the tempo and goals of both union tops and local reformers. The ability of organizations to draw support from the surrounding community, their capacity to organize on a national as well as local level, and their abililty to support and pressure their own elected officials is key to long-term success. This multi-layered, integrated approach is interwoven with a case study of one of the most enduring reform organizations—the Rank and File Caucus of USWA Local 1010 at Inland Steel—from the founding of SWOC to the founding of the caucus in the late 1940's to the mass layoffs in 1979 and beyond.

In the mass organizing drives of the 1930's, Nyden sees no distinction between "the Union" and the needs of the rank and file. While policy and political differences emerged in all the CIO affiliates, there was a high degree of democracy at every level of the union, and a common enemy in an intransigent corporation. Business conservatism and the lack of a centralized administrative hierarchy made local union participation by rank-and-file members not just possible, but necessary. By the end of the 1940's however, corporate offensives against militants and dissidents and corporate toleration of a new breed of responsible labor leaders laid the basis for a separation between "ranks" and "leadership." Centralized bargaining and decreased shopfloor representation took precedence over rank-and-file issues involving local grievances. Relatively high wages and steady employment began to replace the shopfloor control.

As Nyden suggests:

> "Without a well-organized rank and file movement at a union-wide level, the top union leadership was able to centralize

> leadership functions. This internal centralization was as much a response to extra-organizational influences. e.g., pressure from industry, as it was to intra-organizational processes, e.g., pressure from International Union leaders seeking to consolidate their control...The political and economic environment in which the union was functioning... was pulling top leaders away from the rank and file. (p.31)

This centralization in administration, bargaining and information/expertise, which consistently accrued more power to the International leadership, was in part the effect of the corporate need to stabilize labor relations. In order to engage in any sort of long-term planning or investment in new machinery, a guarantee of labor peace was required. Thus the centralization of administrative command was less a function of "bad" or spineless leaders, or of ambitious labor politicians than of objective corporate need and corresponding pressure on local and national leaders.

Due in part of the effects of the 116-day national steel strike in 1959, dissidents shifted their attention from local to national industry questions. In particular, issues of union democracy and internal union questions gave way to questions about corporate-labor stances. "The Union's relation to the Industry" became central, rather than high dues, as a metaphor for a general rank-and-file disenchantment with the leadership. Thus, increased lack of autonomy on wages and working conditions forced the ranks (and many key leaders) to seek national solutions to what earlier had appeared only as local or internal union problems.

Yet while unionwide issues were becoming more important for militants, local groups were adopting localized strategies. Local networks never sufficiently branched out into effective national organizations, and political leaders used legal strategies, media coverage and "personalilties" rather than well thought-through policy programs to attract a following. Nyden applies this criticism to both the early Dues Protest Movement and to the more mature, outward-looking Sadlowski Fight-Back Campaign. He particularly faults the latter for reneging on its claim to be more than a campaign organization, and for seeking to build an International opposition around themselves, rather than opening up leadership to larger networks and trusting an emerging generation of leadership.

Central to Nyden's analysis is the notion that corporate strategy has been largely offensive—determined by the vagaries of international competition and general liquidity problems, but not by a committed labor movement. The industry was willing to pay large wage settlements to modernize its physical plant and to, in effect, scale down its longer-term reliance on human labor. In contrast, the

rank and file has been limited to reacting to corporate initiatives, without being in any position to offer an alternative program or to significantly expand its base. With a shrinking base among primary steel producers, labor leaders have responded by organizing mergers with existing unions, and only secondarily through "organizing the unorganized."

For Nyden, the only solution to the demise of rank-and-file movements is the same solution as for the success of unionism in general. Because the problems of modern working people increasingly come from breakdowns in the economy itself, solutions can no longer be found on a company-wide or even industry-wide basis. The "intra-organizational strategies" of union mergers and membership diversification are internal stop-gap solutions that only put off the day of reckoning. Nyden calls for "seeking greater cooperation with other organizations having similar political and economic interests." Much of this coalition-building is already going on, involving labor, community and religious organizations around plant closings, foreclosures, food-banks, and local electoral campaigns. But Nyden's larger point is well taken. Rank-and-file movements have based their strategies on defensive struggles in local conditions and have not proposed system-wide alternatives or strategies to match those of the organizations they have been dependent on. Until the last five years, they have not had to.

Nyden is unabashedly a partisan. He wants to see the success of a grass-roots-oriented, outward-looking labor movement that is both aggressive and responsive. He thinks the continuing efforts at merger and legal strategies that protect entrenched centralized leaderships are both short-sighted and doomed to fail. Nyden himself has contributed to numerous campaigns of leafletting plant gates and manning partisan offices. More participant than observer, he rightly comments that in highly charged political milieus, the "objective" observer is himself suspect.

For this writer, Nyden's partisanship is not a problem. Rather it doesn't go far enough. To be partisan means to win over (or at least neutralize) members of the opposition as well as to defeat the opposition's leadership. From a centralized union position, this can be done in a variety of ways. But from a rank-and-file perspective it means winning them over by first understanding what motivates support for what is agreed are conservative, self-defeating strategies. Precisely because Nyden focuses on "grass-roots critics of the top USWA leadership rather than on the incumbent leadership itself," he obviates a whole area of explanation and misses a critical dynamic.

What is missing is an understanding of the motivations and the process of political mobilization of the grassroots supporters of the International—the plant walkers/talkers who make up the base of

pro-International sentiment and networks. While Nyden's macrosocial picture is full and complex, his internal union picture is too simple. We are given either an accomodating Internal leadership and a restive and assertive rank and file. We have no inkling of how or why the Internaional can mobilize local networks of rank-and-filers to win elections. Thus while Nyden is sympathetic to opposition grass-roots networks, he seems unaware that equally compelling grass-roots networks exist in departments, sport teams, community and ethnic organizations that attach meaning to and derive benefits from relations with the International. Nyden is too bright and too close to the situation to write them off as either lacking sufficient "consciousness" or as being "bought." But he offers no other explanation. They simply do not appear in his model. Yet to the degree that progressive rank-and-file movements have not touched these bases and have failed to offer an alternative is precisely the degree to which the International has maintained its hegemony. While not "progressive," these loose networks of pro-International sentiment are equally rank-and-file based and are not mobilized simply by having their strings pulled in Pittsburgh.

While objectively a pro-International line may lead to corporate collaboration at the expense of the ranks (witness the catastrophe of concessions bargaining), at the local level there is no clear indication that International supporters are worse fighters of corporate chicanery or contract violations than their reform opponents. Grievances must still be won, and incompetence or corporate chumminess can lead to election defeats even for the most entrenched local leaders. To the degree pro-International leaders can win, it is often by a combination of red-baiting and appeals to experience, combined with a dose of anti-company rhetoric. If they can't deliver, they are defeated on the local level, either by genuine militants or by other aspiring careerist leaders.

The five USWA International officers are regionally and (to a lesser extent) racially balanced; they command support in their regions. While Leon Lynch's election, first from local officer in District 31 to staff representative and then to national Vice President for Human Relations, represented for some observers a cooptation and safe institutionalization of rank-and-file civil rights insurgency, it also represents a degree of power and inclusion for numerous local leaders in his home district. Of the many "Rank and File" leaders cited by Nyden who were elected in 1970 as insurgents, most have long since made their peace with the International and have become instrumental in the development of International policy. Even the current divisions in several reform organizations (divisions that make reelection hopes problematic) are based on differences over allocations of power and patronage rather than any principled differences.

This brings me to a second problem with Nyden—his imprecision about what constitutes a "rank-and-file movement." While he sets out to study a *specific* organization, "a progressive rank-and-file insurgency," he goes much farther afield. Most of this book relates to another question—the increased differentiation between the ranks and International leaderships in general. Despite his interest in detailing the organizational environment that both shaped and limited such movements as the Sadlowski campaign and the Local 1010 Rank and File Caucus, he constantly shuttles between such categories as "grassroots workers movement," "reform movement," "autonomist organizations," "progressive rank-and-file caucus," and "local grassroots networks," as though these were interchangeable. The topic is too broad (and the book too short) to allow for this imprecision. Either the focus is on the fortunes and problems of a model union organization or it is on uneven development in the consciousness of rank-and-file leaders. If it is about both, then no connection is demonstrated in this book.

Nyden's book represents a real contribution to a systematic understanding of the environment against which reform organizations rebel and by which they are shaped and conditioned. Unfortunately, at $24.95 for a thin hard-back edition, it may not get the distribution it deserves. Readers of *Labor Research Review* are encouraged to take advantage of the discount offer advertised in this issue.

• *Steelworkers Rank and File: The Political Economy of a Union Reform Movement,* is published by Praeger, 1984, 166 pp., $24.95.