†*The CIO, 1935-1955.* By Robert H. Zieger. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. x, 491 pp. ISBN 0-8078-2182-9, $39.95 (cloth).

Labor's upsurge in the 1930s remains for many even in our own time a source of inspiration and uplift. Those who are romantically inclined have long cherished the image of union militancy that attaches to that decade, a militancy that many have longed to see revived in recent years. Some contemporary union activists and their supporters, with more than a touch of a similar romanticism, frequently promote the claim that as the anti-union 1920s preceded the 1930s militancy, so too would the anti-union Reagan years give way to rekindled worker activism. Scholars as well have been influenced by this central image of progressive and mobilized "labor on the march" (the phrase with which Edward Levinson entitled his 1938 book). Many an important history has explored aspects of those struggles with insight, even if most writing in this vein must ultimately stress a militancy betrayed, opportunities lost, or working-class interests smothered by opportunistic labor leaders, vicious employers, and government bureaucrats alike.

It is a testimony to the power of this symbol that six decades after the founding of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)—the premier labor institution established during the 1930s to foster industrial unionism—it still retains significant appeal. Yet few have subjected it to a searching analysis. Melvyn Dubofsky's

---

†Because of the importance of this history, the Associate Editor asked Professor Salvatore to prepare an especially thorough review.

1979 article (in the journal *Amerikastudien*), with its provocative evocation of the "not so turbulent Thirties," was, until recently, the exception. Nor has any historian attempted to understand the whole of the CIO's institutional life, from its inception in those "glory years" down through its merger with its erstwhile implacable foe, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), in 1955. To write such a broad history is the task Robert H. Zieger undertakes in this book. Although there are grounds for disagreement and debate, Zieger has written a book of serious scholarship, based on a career-long immersion in archival and secondary sources, a book, moreover, that is replete with new insights, sound judgments, and a solid interpretative framework. It will serve as the standard interpretation for decades to come.

A professor of history at the University of Florida, Zieger is the author of numerous books and articles about American working people in the twentieth century. As in much of his earlier work, this new book reflects a sensitivity to the social and cultural dimensions of working people's lives; but also like that earlier work, it primarily examines the CIO as an institution. Rather than the juggernaut of heroic memory, Zieger found, amid the acknowledged spurts of militancy, an industrial union movement and institution that were "in reality fragile and uncertain." The CIO's greatest strength, he writes, came not in the 1930s but in the context of an intimate and largely dependent relationship with the federal government during wartime; and, Zieger judges, the majority of the CIO's leaders *and* members ultimately desired "responsible, contractual unionism" instead of persistent conflict with employers (4–5, 22). Indeed, neither workers in general nor the newly organized industrial workers in particular, the author argues, sought to challenge the "central features of American society," and the much-noted militancy coexisted quite easily with the most "distressing apathy" among workers (43–45).

Zieger offers an equally bracing commentary on the CIO's institutional structure. Although there is no question that large numbers of workers were newly organized, Zieger warns against assuming that those gains were the sole legacy of the CIO; and thus he takes issue with the common opinion that the CIO's effectiveness was badly damaged in the left/right political disputes within the organization and then destroyed altogether by the 1955 merger. Rather, he suggests that, even at its most innovative, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee—the heart of the early CIO—was fully compatible with the traditional AFL structure; and that the concept of the union as a service organization was already prominent within the CIO in 1937. Even the CIO radicals, with their commitment to a "consumer-driven economics" in line with rank-and-file demands, contributed to the creation of "a largely instrumentalist conception of unionism" that some contemporary militants and scholars now decry (327).

Zieger is not writing to dismiss or debunk the CIO. He clearly applauds the inclusion of more working people in the union movement. But he does intend to correct misguided memories and misconceptions as he provides us with the first full history of that critical organization. His deep command of both primary and secondary sources provides many important interpretations and comments, but four especially deserve some discussion, however brief.

In contrast to those historians who argue that the Wagner Act's National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) entrapped workers in a bureaucratic maze that ultimately stripped them of their militancy, Zieger appreciates the positive role government played in creating conditions conducive to organizing against implacable employers. In many working-class communities in steel, coal, rubber, and auto, the NLRB enabled workers to organize successfully for the first time in their lives. The government-backed legal structure provided by the NLRB led to a dramatic increase in CIO membership, which more than doubled between 1939 and 1944 (from 1.8 million to 3.9 million) despite the withdrawal of more than 600,000 miners from the organization.

But the relationship with the government raised serious questions nonetheless. Could rank-and-file sentiments find their echo in the corridors of the powerful governmental and corporate bureaucracies? While Zieger does not explore this issue in detail, his recognition that the CIO's reliance on the government was in good part a product of a massive transformation of American institutional and cultural life beginning in the late nineteenth century—a transformation of the putative society of independent yeoman into one of centralized and hierarchical organizations—is welcome. It suggests a starting point for future inquiry that would understand the CIO's institutional experience within the parameters of that far broader and commanding metamorphosis of American life.

A second theme concerns race. In general, Zieger finds the CIO record "positive but prob-

lematic" during these decades (160). Early on, CIO leaders were very conscious of the importance of organizing black workers, he writes, but sought to minimize attention to racial matters. Before and during World War II, white workers often conducted "hate strikes" against the presence or upgrading of black workers in the plant or as members of the union. CIO leaders used the power of federal agencies to discipline whites and they proclaimed their institutional commitments to racial justice. Yet within the union movement itself the expectation persisted that the economic improvements unionization promised would themselves, somewhat magically, eliminate racism among white members. These attitudes bound the CIO's efforts in the postwar South as well. Wary of stirring up white racial anger or of challenging entrenched, anti-union white Democratic officials, the major organizing drive, nicknamed "Operation Dixie," was flawed from the start, as black workers were relegated to minor roles. Zieger is quite perceptive about the critical importance of race throughout the CIO's independent existence, yet his criticism does not prevent him from recognizing how a growing conservative political climate after the 1946 strike wave would have largely limited CIO leaders even had they more aggressively pursued this issue.

The third theme concerns the role of the American left, primarily the Communist Party, in the CIO. Like many before him, Zieger acknowledges the important contributions Communists made in organizing the CIO, even as he notes the unease their presence created among many non-Communist unionists as early as 1936 and 1937. That unease continued, occasionally breaking into the open—as in the 1946 United Auto Workers election, which saw the anti-Communist Walter Reuther elected to the presidency of the union—until the irrevocable break in 1949, when eleven unions, with almost one million members, were expelled from the CIO.

Zieger is of two minds about the Communists. As unionists, he finds them generally as good as any others, and specifically rejects the charge that they put Soviet interests ahead of immediate trade union concerns. But he also argues that to claim, as many CIO communists did, that their political affiliation was the equivalent of another CIO member's Democratic party partisanship was fallacious and misleading. Zieger's analysis of the expulsion is quite clear: given the influence of Soviet interests on CIO Communists, especially concerning major domestic and international policy, the CIO had no choice but to expel Communist members.

Finally, Zieger's analysis of the complex character of the men and women who comprised the CIO's rank and file is quite suggestive. His use of polling data, flawed as the data may at times be, is inventive, and it allows him to peer more deeply into day-to-day worker reality. As sharply as they resented employer exploitation, working people, including CIO members, largely supported the nation's business-driven economy and thought union leaders possessed too much power, and they overwhelmingly supported sanctions against Communists in the union. In 1947, almost 40% of workers polled expressed support for the Taft-Hartley Act. Even as the very real economic gains they won threatened to separate CIO members "from the rest of the working class," they in turn experienced an increasing distance from the far more liberal political positions of their CIO leaders and staff members (327). Zieger's understanding of the multiple, contrasting currents that flowed through the CIO's rank and file is an important contribution, even if his institutional emphasis prevents him from exploring these points in greater depth.

Along with Steven Fraser's biography of Sidney Hillman and David Halle's study of male American workers' attitudes in the 1970s, Robert Zieger's fine book provides us with an essential foundation for understanding the modern labor movement, its institutions and its rank and file. That he can accomplish this with a sympathy that is evident yet realistic and unromantic shows him to be a historian of skill and sensitivity who values his craft highly. We his readers are the beneficiaries of that commitment.

Nick Salvatore

Professor
New York State School of
Industrial and Labor Relations
Cornell University