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SUMMER 2001

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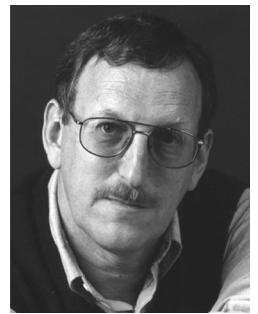
Religious Socialism

THE JOURNAL FOR PEOPLE OF FAITH AND SOCIALISM

Organizing for Social Justice: John Cort and the ACTU

MAURICE ISSERMAN

On a Saturday afternoon in late February 1937, John Cort sat at a kitchen table at the Catholic Worker's House of Hospitality on Mott Street on the Lower East Side of New York City. With him were ten other men - some of them fellow Catholic Workers, others labor organizers or rank-and-file activists from a half dozen labor unions active in the city. Together they formed a group called the Catholic Association of Trade Unionists - soon to be renamed the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU).



Only a year earlier, when Cort was finishing up his senior year at Harvard College, he would have seemed an unlikely candidate to serve as one of the principal instigators of any kind of labor organization, Catholic or otherwise. But that spring, shortly before graduating, he heard Dorothy Day give a speech in Boston; inspired by her message and personal example, his life took a radical new direction. At Day's invitation, Cort moved down to the Catholic Worker's farm community in Easton, Pennsylvania, and shortly afterwards to the Mott Street House of Hospitality.

Day had founded *The Catholic Worker* newspaper in 1933, which soon evolved into a significant movement, loyal to but independent of the Catholic Church. Embracing lives of voluntary poverty, Catholic Workers devoted themselves to ministering to the immediate needs of the poor for food and shelter, while striving to build a new, cooperative, and just world in accordance with the Church's social teachings. Before the decade was over, the Catholic Workers' newspaper was selling close to two hundred thousand copies per issue (at a penny per copy), while hundreds of movement volunteers - many of them young people like John Cort - were staffing soup kitchens and breadlines in Houses of Hospitality in twenty-seven cities across the United States. Over the next several decades alumni of the Catholic Worker movement could be found playing major roles in virtually every significant movement for social change and social justice in the United States, from the peace movement to the war on poverty. And, thanks in good measure to Cort's initiative, they would also find a place within the labor movement.

While remaining a great admirer of Dorothy Day, Cort soon grew dissatisfied with the Catholic Worker's brand of social radicalism. As historian Mel Piehl noted in *Breaking*

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editor's notes

The task of understanding history demands examination of multiple interpretive perspectives. This issue presents three viewpoints that lend insight into old debates and enduring wisdom for the current challenges facing people of faith and labor. Maurice Isserman and Monsignor George Higgins invite a fresh look at the social justice vision of John Cort and the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU). In 1937, inspired by Dorothy Day and papal social encyclicals from *Rerum Novarum* to *Quadragesimo Anno*, Cort and a band of fellow union organizers challenged Catholic Workers to help people get off the bread lines by organizing workers for justice. Isserman and Higgins continue a long-standing argument, however, whether religious unionists like Cort should have expelled communists from the labor movement during the Cold War. (For other perspectives, see the list of resources offered by Maurice Isserman, including Michael Harrington's early appraisal of ACTU in a 1960 issue of *Labor History*.)

Cort's self-described combination of "radicalism, conservatism, and just plain common sense" that he and ACTU advocated, recognizes a broader global challenge to international labor in the twenty-first century. Totalitarian states and capitalists share at least one priority: the destruction of unions and worker cooperatives. Individual entrepreneurs can't match the threat of democratic unions and worker cooperatives. Against the powerful tides of global capital and totalitarianism, John's witness underscores one clear principle of Catholic social teaching: social justice demands that all members of the global village, especially those most privileged, establish the priority of labor over capital in social, political, and economic institutions.

A commitment to the priority of labor over capital invites a critique of the shift of social welfare policy responsibilities to the state and local levels over the past two decades. In place of an aggressive anti-poverty policy at the end of a decade of unprecedented wealth expansion, Bush's "faith based initiative" obscures the social responsibility of citizens and our national government to build a truly common good for all Americans. Debate about the separation of church and state should not blur these fundamental responsibilities of citizens and our national government. Increased federal funding of religious social service agencies means more charity without social justice and more volunteerism without sufficient attention to the structural sources of poverty and economic injustice.

What kind of compassion will the President show single mothers as welfare reform comes up for reauthorization in 2002? Behind the rosy picture of welfare reform painted by Clinton and the dominant press, stands the reality of single mothers struggling to make ends meet. As William Julius Wilson and his colleagues find in their on-going study of welfare reform in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio, the longer single mothers are off welfare, "the less likely they were to have health insurance for themselves or their children, because decreases in the rates of Medicaid coverage were not offset by increases in their private insurance. And many mothers had great difficulties balancing work and child care without health coverage or other elements of the middle class support system, like an automobile,



Religious Socialism
1 Maolis Rd
Nahant, MA
01908

religioussocialism@socialist.org
www.dsusa.org/rs

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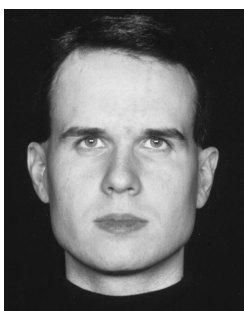
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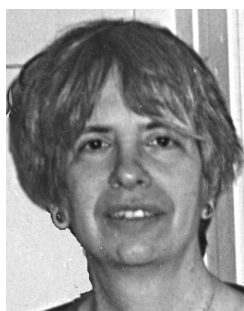
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editor's notes cont'd...

some savings and paid sick leave." (See "The Real Test of Welfare Reform Still Lies Ahead", The New York Times, op-ed, 13 July, 2001.) While many middle and upper-income Americans enjoy tax relief, one in six of all American children and one in two African-American children still live in poverty in the United States. The question is not whether a welfare state exists but who benefits from it.

Meanwhile, the President and Congress debate the merit of prescription drug plans and filing lawsuits against negligent HMOs. What good is the lawyer, or lawsuit, for preventing or healing sickness, treating terminal illness, or caring for the dead and their surviving loved-ones? Yet in his reflection on labor and religion over the past sixty years, John Cort suggests a slightly more rigorous policy prescription than the President or Congress for ailing workers and struggling families: "the only decent provision for these folks is a decent job at decent pay." The reality faced by single mothers and most Americans demand vigorous, national anti-poverty policies that offer living wage jobs, quality health care, affordable housing, and decent, accessible child care. Far from radical, these are merely just proposals for the wealthiest nation on earth.

More radical policy options would extend democracy to the workplace and economy. As Rod Ryon reports, the local efforts of people of faith and labor remain indispensable in the pursuit of living wage jobs, decent health care, anti-sweatshop campaigns, and trade that contributes to safe

working conditions and just wages for all workers. These grassroots efforts would gain more effective support, if we, as people of faith and Americans, press the President and Congress to address the structural causes of injustice with revitalized social democratic policies.

In a culture that sanctifies individual wealth and capital at the expense of the majority of workers, the toils of John Cort and many like him invite us to recognize, in the poetic words of Gwendolyn Brooks, that "we are each other's harvest: we are each other's business: we are each other's magnitude and bond." May all people of faith and justice join in a loving struggle of daily prayer, protest, writing, and organizing, so that we discover a little more of the height, breadth, and depth of our shared harvest, magnitude, and bond.

— Alex Mikulich



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John Cort and the ACTU

cont'd from page 1

Bread: *The Catholic Workers and the Origin of Catholic Radicalism in America* (1982), Cort "found himself drawn to union halls rather than soup lines."

The Catholic Church, as an institution, had not always shown itself so well disposed towards union halls. In 1880, a year before the founding of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), Bishop J. L. Spalding of Peoria warned that it would prove "almost impossible" for the church to keep its Irish-American parishioners "out of trades-unions and other societies, the tendency of which in the United States will be more and more in the direction of communism." Irish-Americans were indeed drawn to unions in the years that followed, as were the Catholic workingclasses of Europe. Fearing the Church was losing influence to secular and socialist-inclined union leaders, Pope Leo XIII issued a papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 that sharpened Catholicism's own critique of modern capitalism, which was, in Leo's words, fastening upon "the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than slavery." Forty years later, Leo's successor Pius XI renewed the Church's claim to represent an alternative to capitalist exploitation, with his own encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*. It was "obvious," Pius declared, "that not only is wealth concentrated in our times, but an immense power and despotic economic dictatorship is consolidated in the hands of a few." Seeking a middle way between socialism and capitalism, the Pope called upon Catholics to work for the creation of a more cooperative and democratic economic system in which workers, along with their employers, could share in "the ownership, or the management, or the profits."

The "labor encyclicals", as they came to be called, were open to a wide variety of interpretation when it came to their practical application. Dorothy Day, for one, sought to apply their teachings by means of creating a rather other-worldly community that would in its day-to-day devotion to serving the poor prefigure the coming cooperative society — a vision of utopia that drew rather less upon medieval corporate imagery than the papal encyclicals, and more upon a combination of Christian perfectionism, Gandhian-style direct action pacifism, and a dash of agrarian romanticism (a blend that Day's collaborator, Peter Maurin, in a prophetic turn of phrase, termed the "Green Revolution.")

Cort, however, had no sooner settled into Mott Street than he began to raise questions about whether the Catholic Worker's combination of good works and righteous intentions were sufficient response to a mass social catastrophe like the Great Depression, let alone a faithful application of *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*. He wanted to take on the system of "power and economic domination" denounced by the Pope in a more directly confrontational - if still non-violent - fashion. He was, in particular, excited by the possibilities for reshaping the American political and economic landscape by integrating

the spirit of Catholic radicalism into the crusade for industrial unionism spearheaded by a new force in the labor movement, the Committee [later Congress] for Industrial Organization (CIO).

For years the craft unions affiliated with the dominant force in American trade unionism, the AFL, had contented themselves with representing a minority of skilled workers, while largely ignoring the plight of the great majority of American workers - many of them European Catholic immigrants and their offspring — employed in mass production industries like steel and auto manufacturing. In a sharp break with the AFL's timidity and conservatism, the insurgents of the new CIO vowed to carry the union gospel to the places where it was most needed, including such bastions of the unorganized "open shop" as the United Steel and General Motors corporations. And by 1937, thanks to burgeoning worker discontent, some sympathetic allies in

RESOURCES TO READ

For influential treatments of the ACTU, see Michael Harrington, "Catholics in the Labor Movement: A Case History", *Labor History*, Vol. I (Fall 1960); Steve Rosswurm, "The Catholic Church and the Left-Led Unions: Labor Priests, Labor Schools, and the ACTU," in Rosswurm, ed., *The CIO's Left-Led Unions* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1992); and Douglas Seaton, *Catholics and Radicals: The Association of Catholic Trade Unionists and the American Labor Movement from Depression to Cold War* (Lewisburg, PA, 1981). For a recent complaint from a prominent Catholic reformer over the historical treatment of the ACTU, see Msgr. George C. Higgins, "Working-Class New York," June 5, 2000. (<http://www.pernet.net/~sinclair/higgins/higgins-69.htm>)

government, and innovative tactics like the sit-down strike, the CIO had begun to drag its corporate foes to the bargaining table. That summer Cort predicted in the pages of the *Catholic Worker* that "the CIO will determine the future of the labor movement, and the labor movement will determine the future of America."

But who would determine the future character of the CIO? Many of the new labor federation's most devoted organizers - and many of those who would accordingly step into leading positions in its affiliated unions - were radicals of one stripe or another, Socialists, Trotskyists, Communists, and others. As a devout Catholic given to quoting *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* at the least provocation, Cort considered himself a proponent of a movement no less radical in its social aims than its Marxist rivals, and one that was infinitely preferable in its spiritual values. In this moment of crisis and opportunity, shouldn't Catholics be in the forefront of the drive for industrial unionism, rather than leaving that position, by default, to the secular radicals?

ACTU's founding constitution, which Cort helped draft, defined a three-fold mission of advocacy and organizing: "A) Enrolling into this Association all Catholic trade

unionists.B) Promoting unionization among unorganized Catholic workers; C) Applying Catholic doctrine to the problems of the trade union movement.”

The ACTU did not come close to realizing the first of its stated goals, for even as the CIO enrolled millions of new members, ACTU membership probably never reached more than five or six thousand nationwide. In left-wing terminology, the group would be considered a “cadre” rather than a “mass” organization, attracting only an elite corps of the most committed Catholic labor activists, rather than the rank and file. But, as the history of the twentieth century Left proved time and again, a militant minority of true believers could act as a powerful force for political change. In the late 1930s, ACTU chapters and influence spread from New York to other centers of industrial production, including Detroit, Chicago, and Pittsburgh. Catholic Workers like Cort were the instigators for some of the new chapters; elsewhere, as in Pittsburgh, “labor priests” like Father Charles Owen Rice played the role of organizational sparkplug. ACTU held a convention in 1940 intended to pull its several thousand locally-affiliated members into a unified national presence, but for some reason - perhaps the lingering influence of its Catholic Worker origins - decentralized chapter autonomy continued to characterize the organization (one of the results being that it is very difficult to come up with an accurate count of ACTU membership.) ACTU was thus less “democratic centralist” than its Communist rivals - but the members of its local chapters proved no less disciplined, self-sacrificing, or effective.

ACTU activists were soon swept up in CIO organizing drives. Cort and others from the New York chapter marched on picket lines to support striking retail, factory and shipyard workers, as well as the professional reporters of the Newspaper Guild. In alliance with crusading labor priests from the Jesuit-organized Xavier Labor School in lower Manhattan, they launched a decades-long effort to free the New York City waterfront from the rapacious grasp of its racketeering leaders, a struggle commemorated in the 1954 Hollywood classic “On the Waterfront.” In Detroit ACTU activists helped counter anti-CIO propaganda spread by the influential “radio priest” Father Charles Coughlin, whose flirtation with fascist doctrine in the later 1930s had converted him into a determined foe of progressive unionism. The ACTU and sympathetic local clergy like Monsignor John Mies successfully discredited the Coughlinites, and in doing so helped the United Auto Workers win a decisive strike against the Chrysler corporation. (As a result of such activities, the ACTU built a broader workingclass base in Detroit than anywhere else in the country.) Around the country, ACTU chapters organized labor schools, instructing thousands of students in Catholic social doctrine and practical trade union organizing, with a curriculum ranging from St. Thomas Aquinas to Robert’s Rules of Order.

The most vexing issue faced by the ACTU was that of how to respond to Communist influence in the CIO. Tactical considerations initially dictated that the issue be addressed

in public with some restraint, given that anti-CIO ideologues were denouncing the entire movement for industrial unionism as nothing more than a Communist conspiracy to be shunned by all good Catholics. The last thing ACTU’s militants wanted to do was hand Coughlin more ammunition. The Communists themselves were downplaying the revolutionary rhetoric and extremist positions of earlier days, promoting a politics of anti-fascist unity that brought them an unprecedented measure of respect on the liberal and pro-labor Left. Excessive anti-Communist rhetoric at such a moment would only marginalize the ACTU as a group of disruptive fanatics. It was in this climate that John Cort wrote in the *Catholic Worker* in the summer of 1937 that in “the vast majority” of CIO unions, “the Communists constitute an insignificant minority.” The disclaimer, he would later concede, was “stretching it a bit” — at the height of their influence, Communists would actually lead about a third of the CIO unions (notably including the New York City-based Transport Workers Union, the west coast longshore union, and the United Electrical Workers) and were serious contenders for power in several others, including the massive United Auto Workers.

But by the end of World War Two, both the political climate and the ACTU’s priorities shifted dramatically. The CIO was now a going concern, and Father Coughlin a discredited has-been. American Communists had squandered most of the goodwill they briefly enjoyed in the later 1930s by their uncritical support of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939. The wartime “grand alliance” of the United States and the Soviet Union against the Nazis had temporarily sidelined the anti-Communist cause, but even before the war was over American Catholics had watched the Red Army’s advance into eastern Europe (and especially into heavily Catholic Poland) with mounting apprehension. All these factors, plus a sharpening of the CIO’s internal factional battles, led the ACTU to shift its emphasis after the war from offering a Catholic *alternative* to Communist leadership, to spearheading a Catholic *opposition* to Communism .

To give one prominent example, Father Charles Owen Rice, the ACTU chaplain in Pittsburgh, played a highly visible role in coordinating an attack from both within and without

Today, as in the 1930s, a large proportion of the urban workforce consists of recent – and unorganized– Catholic immigrants and their children.

A Labor Priest's Tribute to John Cort

MONSIGNOR GEORGE G. HIGGINS

If memory serves me correctly, I first met John Cort in the early forties while he was recuperating from tuberculosis at a sanitarium on the outskirts of New York City. Several years earlier he had joined with ten other lay rank and file trade unionists in establishing the now defunct Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU). In 1997, happily fully recovered from his illness, John, now an extraordinarily vigorous octogenarian, wrote a brief history of ACTU for publication in *The Encyclopedia of American Catholic History* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1997). In a concluding section on the origins of ACTU, John wrote as follows:



Stalinist sympathizers in the academic community have published a number of books that maintain that (ACTU's) anti-communist activity was the primary, if not the sole activity of the ACTU. This is a total fabrication. Much more typical of ACTU concerns was its involvement in two strikes in the late thirties: The strike of Woolworth store clerks in New York and the strike of Chrysler auto workers in Detroit.

It seems this "fabrication" is still in currency. I decided, in fairness to Cort and his colleagues to address it in my own book, *Organized Labor and the Church* — a book which Cort himself, if anything, reviewed too generously in *Commonweal*. (Editor's note: Monsignor Higgins graciously offers *RS* readers his perspective of ACTU and John Cort found in *Organized Labor and the Church: Reflections of a "Labor Priest"*, New York: Paulist Press, 1993, pp.58-62):

Since the heyday of church-labor cooperation, revisionist historians have looked for dark and cynical motives behind the Catholic Church's involvement in the labor movement. A common thesis is that if not for the Catholic Church's intervention, there might have been a socialist labor movement in the United States. It is worth clearing the air on this point, if for no other reason than that the ghosts of past quarrels appear now and then in dialogues between religion and labor.

Much of the revisionism has dealt with the now-defunct Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU). That's

"unionists," not unions; the difference is between separate Catholic unions of the European variety and parallel organizations of Catholic union members — the ACTU model. Launched in New York City by former members of the Catholic Worker (notably John Cort, a Catholic convert and early organizer of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union), ACTU defined its mission as spreading the church's teachings on labor. The movement drew part of its mandate from Pope Pius XI's 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* which encouraged Christian workers to form parallel (though not necessarily competing) associations of Catholic workers.

In practically no time, the movement branched out from New York and spawned independent chapters across the map of urban industrial America. ACTU published a number of first-rate newspapers. In Detroit, for example, *The Wage Earner* took an active role in promoting the legitimacy of industrial unions as ACTU leaders worked closely with Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers. For better or worse, ACTU had no national coordination. So while in many places the movement rallied support for striking workers, in others it knocked heads with communists in the labor movement or tried to root out organized crime. It is the brush with Bolshevism that has driven so much of the historical investigation.

A fairly typical work of this genre is Douglas P. Seaton's *Catholics and Radicals: The Association of Catholic Trade Unionists and the American Labor Movement from Depression to Cold War*. In his 1981 book, Seaton argues tendentiously — almost ad nauseam — that "the partisans of the church" and specifically ACTU were a, if not the, crucial factor in determining the "conservative" direction taken by the industrial unions during the period between 1937 and 1950.

Undergirding this sweeping generalization is Seaton's recurrent charge, tinged with a note of personal pique and hostility, that Catholic social teaching (which ACTU, however effectively or otherwise, tried to put into practice) is hopelessly "conservative." In a telltale footnote, Seaton gives his hand away by defining his loaded terms. In short, "radicals" (the good guys) are those committed to class struggle and a socialist order. "Conservatives" (the bad guys) are, conversely, those who reject the philosophy of class struggle and do not belong to any formal school of socialism.

With his basic code words so defined Seaton has no trouble proving, at least to his own satisfaction, that the Catholic Church in general and ACTU in particular were conservative. Even John A. Ryan, in the author's mind, was only a half-hearted progressive. On the other hand, he locates the "radicals" more often than not in the communist leadership of some of the old CIO unions. All this begs the question of whether the program pushed by these so-called "radicals" in labor's communist ranks represented the best interests of labor and the nation as a whole. It's not as if we're talking about Mikhail Gorbachev-style communists, much less democratic socialists of the Michael Harrington variety. These were Stalinists, and their virtually absolute allegiance

to the Communist Party was regarded by many, not unreasonably, as contrary to the idea of an independent labor movement.

Be that as it may, Seaton argues that ACTU's commitment to "conservative" Catholic social teaching and its reluctance to break with the church made it inevitable that an obsessive anti-communism would become "virtually the sole issue which occupied the organization." Seaton and other historians of his ilk are not alone in thinking that ACTU (or, more precisely, some local chapters of ACTU) went overboard with its anti-communism. One who has looked back on that period is Msgr. Charles Owen Rice, whose penitent reflections are captured in the title of his summer 1989 article, "Confessions of an Anti-Communist," published in *Labor History*.

Rice, who worked closely with ACTU through his Catholic Radical Alliance in Pittsburgh, says he is not proud of the crusades to remove communists from positions of influence in the labor movement. He still holds, quite rightly, that the primary loyalty of communists was to the Communist Party, not to the labor movement, and that their triumph would have been labor's disaster. In retrospect, however, he believes that the communists never had a chance. Most of all, he regrets that he (and other "actists," as they were known) at times employed tactics as ruthless and merciless, in his view, as those of their adversaries.

"Most of us ACTU people had been influenced by Dorothy Day in the direction of enthusiastic support for organized labor, but we lost Dorothy's serenity and positive spirit along the way," he wrote in *Commonweal* in 1984. "We were pro-labor and not merely anti-communist, but I for one wish there had been far less emphasis on the negative."

Misgivings about anti-communist crusades in labor have not only come after the fact. At the height of labor's cold war, the communist question provoked heated debates, pro and con, in ACTU circles around the country. The failure of many historians to report adequately on the ins and outs of this intramural ACTU debate is but one indication of their ideological bias. In Seaton's case the oversight stems not only from the apparently limited scope of his research (he appears to have relied much too heavily on the extant files of the New York ACTU, which, in the opinion of some, took its anti-communism too far). It also grows out of an almost compulsive desire to nail down his central thesis.

Other revisionists have attributed even darker motives to the church's interest in the labor problem. In his 1989 critical biography, *Rev. Charles Owen Rice: Apostle of Contradiction*, Patrick McGeever gives credence to charges that Rice and ACTU were primarily concerned not with

social justice (nor even, for that matter, with anti-communism) but rather with having Catholicism prevail over all other religious groups. "Of particular note in this line of criticism," McGeever writes, "was the interest that the ACTU and its 'labor leaders' were at that time expressing in having the CIO establish relations in Europe not with the socialist trade union federation, the World Federation of Trade Unions, but with its Catholic rival, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions."

While McGeever does not actually say he agrees with this "criticism," he does tailor the evidence to fit the thesis. In fact, the example that he relates is simply untrue. The World Federation of Trade Unions was then and up until its demise in 1990 a communist, not a socialist, federation; the International Confederation of Trade Unions was and still is a social-democratic federation and by no means a Catholic rival to the world federation. This spurious example betrays yet another flaw in many of these studies — the blurring of any distinction between "socialist" and "communist." At several points McGeever uses the two words interchangeably, as if to suggest that anti-communist equals anti-socialist (and therefore anti-progressive). In fact, not only is there a huge difference between the two, but ACTU and other Catholic activists often teamed up with democratic socialists in opposing labor's communist forces.

Still other revisionists have described ACTU as a plot on the part of the church's hierarchy to influence the labor movement. In other words, the bishops pulled ACTU's strings. This charge rankles in particular because it raises, once again, the myth of the monolithic church. During those years I happened to be the bishops' liaison to groups such as ACTU. I would have sooner attempted to infiltrate the Politburo or General Motors than

insinuate myself into the politics of ACTU. The actists were fiercely jealous of their autonomy, guarding it against church authorities as well as other chapters of the organization.

More often than not, in a given city, ACTU got off the ground without any episcopal blessing and in some cases against the better judgment of the bishop. It would be hard to imagine that the New York ACTU was even remotely started up by the archbishop there. As it turned out, during a 1949 gravediggers' strike against cemeteries owned by the archdiocese of New York, ACTU sided squarely with the cemetery workers and opposed the archbishop. This could not have pleased Francis Spellman.

Did ACTU as well as other Catholic activists make mistakes in their dealings with labor? Undoubtedly. But being in a position to travel around at the time, I was about as close to ACTU as anyone else; and while I did not always like what I

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**...action for the
genuine progress
of labor was the
rule rather than
the exception in
the Catholic
social action
movement.**



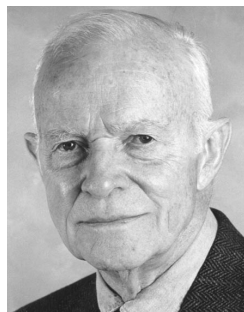
York we set up a soup kitchen on the waterfront that fed CIO seamen who were striking against both shipowners and their corrupt AFL leaders. We organized an Association of Catholic Trade Unionists to mobilize support for labor in general and the CIO in particular. The young priests got involved and many young men and women came out of college to work in the labor movement.

Thanks in part to World War II and the great demand for labor, both the CIO and the AFL grew into mass organizations that together represented 35 percent of the workforce. By the 1950s labor was a major player in the political and economic life of this country.

The Captain's Laugh

JOHN C. CORT

In 1936 I was one year out of school and working with Dorothy Day at the Catholic Worker in New York City. Dorothy was an ex-Communist, a brilliant journalist and a convert like myself. In 1933 she had started a radical newspaper and a chain of Houses of Hospitality and bread lines that would eventually spread over the U.S. and around the world.



The labor movement, then as now, was on its way back from a period of doldrums and defeats by an arrogant brand of capitalism that was riding high on a wave of new inventions and reactionary friends in Washington, D.C. The wave crashed on the rocks of the Great Depression and about 30 percent of the nation's labor force became unemployed. And no unemployment insurance.

That same year, 1936, John L. Lewis, breathing fire, brimstone and quotations from Shakespeare and the Bible, was leading the CIO out of the moribund AFL and into a series of successful drives to organize the mass production industries, especially auto, steel and electrical. FDR and the Democratic control of Congress helped.

Dorothy traveled to strike scenes and wrote vivid reports that fired our young imaginations. In New

Today the unionized percentage of the workforce has been cut in half. Greed, and the kind of capitalism that feeds and flourishes on greed, rides high once again on another wave of new inventions and the discovery that you can get it made much cheaper in Mexico and China. So you throw your American employees out on the street and make the CEO a billionaire.

The captains of industry laugh at the labor movement and continue to use every dirty trick in the book to prevent the AFL-CIO from organizing the unorganized. Under Clinton's unhappy administration too many Democrats in Congress caved in before the cries of "Go global!" and "Let those single mothers fend for themselves."

**WE NEED A PROGRAM THAT
IS BUILT ON THE WISDOM OF
SAMUEL JOHNSON'S DICTUM:
'A DECENT PROVISION FOR
THE POOR IS THE TRUE TEST
OF CIVILIZATION.'**

But is all lost? Far from it. The labor movement, which is the hope and bulwark of the Democratic Party, has survived its splits over racketeering, the Communist invasion, the Vietnam War, the boring conservatism of George Meany and Lane Kirkland, and the disaffection of the intellectuals. It is truly on the way back to being a major player in the life of this country.

For this survival and revival John Sweeney deserves major credit. A balding, pink-cheeked, unassuming man who could pass for everybody's Irish uncle, he built the Service Employees into a great, powerful union by recognizing that those who need unions even more than construction or factory workers are poor immigrant women working in the service industries. And he got out on the street in support of his membership. I have seen him out there twice myself.

Sweeney challenged the old-line leadership in 1996 and won. By which I do not mean to imply that Tom Donahue, whom he defeated, was not a good, decent trade unionist. Just not angry enough.

As GREED, Inc. rode higher and higher, the academics and the college students began to find labor more and more attractive, and the students began to realize that they were being used to transfer American jobs to miserable sweatshops in distant lands. And they got involved in fighting it. And some went to work for the AFL-CIO.

A Movement Is Building

In short, a movement is building. And the left is united as it has not been since the Thirties. Maybe not in DSA, although John Sweeney, the key man here, is a member and that should make a difference in the long haul.

We need a national Democratic leader who can build on this and bring back those who went with Nader for many understandable reasons. And we need a program that is built on the wisdom of Samuel Johnson's dictum: "A decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilization."

And what is a decent provision for the poor, and not just for the poor, but for the not-so-poor who were working yesterday but are now out on the street desperate for work?

The only decent provision for these folks is a decent job at decent pay. And not a job constructing nuclear power plants, or plants run on coal or oil drilled out of our wildlife refuges, the clever bait that Bush and Cheney are using to split the labor movement. Not that. We want jobs building, repairing, maintaining, operating new and old schools, hospitals, health and child care clinics, roads, transportation facilities, clean energy and the environment. Those are the jobs that we need, that everyone needs to make this a truly healthy, prosperous, civilized country.

Why can't the Democrats see this? Why is it you never hear anybody down in Washington yelling and screaming that this is madness, giving the rich tax cuts when we could be giving the poor and the unemployed decent jobs? Is our economy the best in the world, as the pundits like to claim? Nonsense. Overall poverty and, in frightful particular, our rate of child poverty remain among the very worst in the industrial world. From this standpoint, the standpoint of justice and religious truth, the U.S. economy is one of the very worst. We should be ashamed.

not-so-insignificant

It is up to us, our not-so-insignificant band of democratic and religious socialists, to spread this Gospel. It can be done. As

Jesse likes to say, "Keep hope alive." ▀

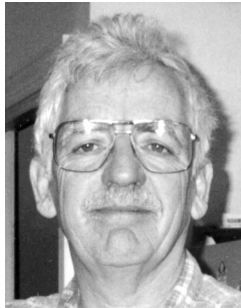
John Cort is the founding editor of Religious Socialism and for many years was a full-time AFL-CIO local union official.

THE LABOR
MOVEMENT
IS TRULY ON
THE WAY
BACK
TO BEING A
MAJOR
PLAYER
IN THE LIFE
OF THIS
COUNTRY.

what is being done?

ROD RYON

Vladimir Lenin entitled his famous pamphlet nearly a century ago, "What is to be Done?" But if there's a single distinguishing characteristic of religious socialists, compared to all the other kinds, it might be the drive to get on with some kind of activity right now. There's the sense of "witness," the idea that doing something to be on the right side right now matters, rather than waiting for some strategy or blueprint in the distant future. In the words of a not too old Christian hymn, "I know not where the road will lead . . . /but still/ I walk the King's highway."



Religious groups getting behind workers and worker struggles have been springing up everywhere. Older peace and justice groups like Pax Christi coalesced with People of Faith networks in the late 1990s, in living wage and "justice for janitors" campaigns, in anti-sweatshop campaigns, and interfaith networks for worker justice. The new groups are partly the brainchild of recent AFL/CIO leadership who recognize an old truth in the history of the Left, that visible support of religious communities lends respect and respectability to labor movements. But central commissions and the like of regional and national religious organizations and some top notch leadership have also lent support.

Perhaps the most involved network is the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice (website: nicwj.org). A visit to their user-friendly web page is the best way to get a flavor and the news of what's happening in a particular part of the country — just follow the links to local affiliates. I recently followed up internet postings with some phone calls to discover a remarkable diversity and creativity of activities of groups from Boston to Honolulu, and south Florida to Seattle. Local leaders complain about setbacks, burn-out, and, here and there, some lagging interest but still quite a few comrades out there seem to be skillfully figuring out the niche of religious groups in local struggles. What follows is a summary of goings-on in a few places, with a spotlight on the kinds of work you, the reader, might not have imagined. But for a fuller picture check the web pages and local contacts yourself:

There's the sense of "witness," the idea that doing something to be on the right side right now matters...

The National Committee itself works especially on behalf of very low wage workers and has come up with a "workers' rights" brochure published in more than seven languages to insert in Sunday church bulletins of working class congregations. It reasons immigrant workers will trust the church setting more than the government office. NICWJ publishes a very newsy twelve page Faith Works letter and offers a summer internship especially for Roman Catholic seminarians that combines a study of Catholic social teaching and work on a labor project. (They also offer a regular "Summer Seminary" project for 40 or so seminarian and rabbinical students.) The "Religious Employers" effort identifies institutions like hospitals to secure a pledge for fair treatment of workers.

Muslim, Christian, and Jewish groups joined together recently in the South Florida Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice. The Committee contributes to the Dade County Coalition for a Living Wage and its efforts to open a few "Workers Centers" in working-class neighborhoods that offer short-term help and information about worker's rights. Indiana Methodists, in partial affiliation with an interfaith group in Indianapolis, have gotten a regional conference to adopt "contractors' building codes" for construction workers on at least some church buildings. The Louisiana Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice promotes "Labor Peace" agreements whereby employers sign a pledge not to use unfair tactics against labor organizers. They successfully gained peace agreements with several local shipyards but report that local hotels and restaurants remain intransigent.

With a living wage bill to go on the ballot in February 2002, and one to cover all workers in New Orleans, not just those on city contracts, the Committee promoted a study by Robert Pollin that demonstrates the financial feasibility of the living wage measure. (Robert Pollin and Stephanie Luce, *The Living Wage: Building a Fair Economy*, New York: The New Press, 1998. See also facts and background on the

living wage at the Economic Policy Institute webpage: www.epinet.org/issueguides.)

The Minneapolis/Saint Paul Religion and Labor Network coordinates a number of attention-getting clergy "presences"— at a rally/press conference of striking Minnesota nurses, at a "funeral" for the death of workers' rights at Dakota Premium Company, at a meat-packing plant that recently attempted to sabotage worker representation, and at the Holiday Inn River Center, that refused to hire back its union workers after it closed for a year. These struggles continue. ▀

Rod Ryon is co-chair of the Religion and Socialism Commission.

You Don't Know What You've Got 'Til It's Gone

by William R. Kelley

Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered,
Jack Metzgar.
Philadelphia: Temple University Press,
2000, 264pp.



Jack Metzgar's book is an attempt at a three-way reconciliation: of New Left with Old Labor, of a son with his father, and of historical memory with historical truth. In all of these he succeeds nicely, falling short only when he attempts to venture into the realm of historical explanation. A satisfactory explanation, though, would require a treatment much longer than the few chapters he gives to trying to account for what he has found.

What Metzgar found, and offers to us, is a huge gap in historical memory. What has disappeared is any awareness of the tremendous social importance of unions in the period from the end of World War II to the end of the 1970s. Metzgar begins on a personal note with an incident where even his father, as strong a union man as one could want, for a moment forgot "what we all owe the union," then traces this lacuna through popular culture to the major written histories that cover the period.

To show that there is a gap Metzgar writes a history of the massive Steel Strike of 1959. Taken as the "largest strike in U.S. history," this becomes a springboard to show the importance of the strike to the continued strength of the union, the importance of a strong union to its members, and the importance of a strong union movement to other, non-unionized workers around the country.

It is in the historical portions that the book is at its strongest. The narrative is brisk and engaging, and whenever the larger history is intertwined with personal material the reality of the history is brought vividly to life. Metzgar begins with a general history of the formation of the CIO, the organization of the Steelworkers, and the trajectory that led to the Big One, the strike of 1959. He continues with a chapter on the history of the strike itself. At every point Metzgar highlights the important positive effects unionization had on steelworkers.

Metzgar even devotes a chapter to an eloquent defense of the reason for the strike and the Steelworkers' insistence on "no backward steps." This was Section 2-B, which addressed work rules: in particular, past practice and "local working conditions." The author is placed in the unenviable position of justifying exactly the kind of thing that has often been pointed to as one of the "excesses" of

unions and succeeds! Rather than thinking in terms of "rigid union work rules," he adopts instead the concept of "workplace rule of law," and shows what a difference a rule of law can make to the lives of the workers. If the workplace rule of law is, at base, designed to prevent arbitrary abuses of management power, then to have

given way on Section 2-B would indeed have opened up a loophole any good lawyer could have used to unravel many of the bonds the union had crafted to rein in management. It all makes sense.

Next, he shows how important the Steelworkers' success in defending the workplace rule of law was to stopping a general management counteroffensive and facilitating a gradual spread of the standards won by unions to the rest of society. I can't complain about that. In the early 1980s I worked for an employee benefits consulting firm, and it was understood that unionized shops set the standard by which everyone else in the company would be measured. Whenever the union won a new benefit or an extension of an existing one, everyone else had to be adjusted upwards also, even if only just enough to offer them more than what came to union members. This, a senior consultant told me, was so management could give all the salaried employees the message that, whatever they were doing, they deserved better than the guys on the shop floor. When the union newsletter runs the cartoon of the union member holding up the rest of the world, this is no joke. Metzgar does a good job pointing it out.

Metzgar has succeeded in his first goal, then, to restore to memory the central significance of the union movement of the 1950s and show the presence of an absence in the conventional narratives of the time. The three chapters devoted to the Steelworkers, the strike, its reason and its importance are solid, readable, and exciting. They are the heart of the book. At the same time, those who adopted the perspective of the New Left can come to terms with Old Labor, and a son can reconcile with his father. The book is well worth it if only for this.

Metzgar's second goal is one of accounting for the presence of this gap or lacuna in historical memory. He devotes two chapters to this, one to why participants in union culture could forget their own past and one to why the general culture would be so forgetful. While he only mentions the word once or twice, what Metzgar is trying to do is account for what is called hegemony in the formation of mass consciousness. The concept, in its modern form, comes from the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. It was fine for Marx and Engels to write in *The German Ideology* that:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class,

cont'd on next page

which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.

This insight, which starts from taking a critical historical perspective on observed outcomes and initially seems plausible enough, proves problematic as soon as an analyst tries to understand this in terms of a historical process that would tend to result in the outcomes observed. Gramsci tried to talk about processes by talking about hegemony, or influential political leadership by one member of a group. A class fragment exercises hegemony over the rest of society whenever it articulates positions in such a way that it appears, in the experience of the members of society, to speak for everyone.

In short, after the 1960s unions were just abandoned by nearly everyone with whom they may have made common cause or at least have bothered to remember them.

Metzgar gives hegemony to the professional middle class; in particular, everyone who has been through the homogenizing process of going to college, becoming part of the salariat, and reproducing this class-based perspective in their own cultural productions. Metzgar, as a college professor from the working class, and who as such shares the split consciousness of all those who make this transition, is a close observer and seems to be on solid ground here.

For example, when he notes the concerted efforts of representatives of business to distribute educational material on the virtues of the capitalist system that, amazingly, provides all the benefits attained by unions without mentioning unionization, or when the Rubberworkers were unable to have the history of the union movement included in the general history taught to Akron schoolchildren, these are telling moments in the erasure of unions from history.

However, how could it be that those who were so involved in the “culture of unionism” would themselves forget, particularly if, as he writes, at one time they were so aware

of their difference? Metzgar provides lots of vivid pieces of historical narrative but none of it is woven into a whole. Union politics may have led some to discount the 1959 strike, and disenchantment with the union may have led others to discount the importance of unionization overall. The business class had its reasons for dismissing unions, liberal professionals had theirs, and the New Left had its own scathing critique. Upwardly mobile children had their own causes for forgetfulness. In short, after the 1960s unions were just abandoned by nearly everyone with whom they may have made common cause or at least have bothered to remember them.

Here his answer is less satisfactory. Even if all their former allies abandoned them, why couldn't the unions themselves, which seemed to be such powerful institutional actors in the late 1950s, assert themselves in such a way as to defend their own importance, at least to their members? Rather than a hodge-podge of pieces of narrative, Metzgar would have done better, I think, to have included a consideration of the way in which the hegemony of the professional middle class penetrates even the



consciousness of the working class and its children.

To understand the workings of hegemony Metzgar needed a broader comparative perspective. He would have found that not just regarding unions, but in general, collective enterprises are nearly invisible when compared to the celebration of the individual. For instance, why isn't public health better remembered? Epidemiologists know that a great deal of the improved lifespan of Americans is due not to heroic surgeons but to basic public health measures: clean water, clean air, sanitary waste disposal, mass vaccinations, and things like that, but this is nearly invisible compared to the triumphs of the latest advances in surgery. We've heard of Jane Addams, but who are the people who eliminated Chicago's mosquito-borne disease problems of the late 19th and early 20th centuries? Similarly, engineering is almost always collaborative work. How

many famous engineers can you name? We all know who Neil Armstrong is, but who designed the Saturn B-5 booster? Metzgar is on the trail of something bigger than the invisibility of unions.

Similarly, Metzgar could use more historical depth. When he writes that the view of the U.S. as having three classes was a mistake that “began in the fifties” (p. 211), he is simply wrong. If he had looked back into classic work done by anthropologists and sociologists of the United States: *Middletown*, *Middletown Revisited*, *Democracy in Elmtown*, *Lloyd Warner’s Yankee City series*, *Plainville*, etcetera, he would have developed a better basis for comparison, and would have seen that the rough outline in terms of three classes long predates the 1950s.

So Metzgar has not fully accounted for the hegemony of certain class fragments bearing certain images of an ideal America. An answer might begin by noting that no one is just a steelworker, or merely a member of a union. Instead, personal identity is built up from a variety of social relations engaged in by an individual, and many of these involve relative status ranking. This is a basic pathway through which hegemonic ideas of heroic individualism can come to take up residence in one’s soul. One can hardly blame Metzgar for not going there, however, since the topic needs more than a few chapters.

Similarly, there is one chapter that, in a basic way, is not part of the overall subject of the book. After explaining the importance of Section 2-B to the Steelworkers, and touching on the question of whether work rules affect productivity, Metzgar takes a chapter to address the question of whether a strong labor union “harmed” the steel industry. It is easy enough to see why he wanted to address it. It seems like many of those he has known are actively hostile to “productivity,” since they identify it with personal exhaustion. Still, a question like this deserves a book-length treatment of its own, and it hurts the overall flow of the text to try to treat it as an aside.

There are two issues that must be addressed: (1) whether work rules harmed “productivity” and (2) whether the proportion of revenues returned to labor made U.S. steel so expensive that it was (a) priced out of the emerging global market, (b) made so unprofitable compared to other steel sources that capital fled the U.S. steel industry, or some combination of the two.

As for the first question, Metzgar is able to show that productivity in the U.S. steel industry, as measured in annual tons shipped per wage worker, continuously improved from the period 1940 to 1984, and remained higher even than Japanese workers as late as 1982. But then he starts to lard it on unnecessarily, writing that productivity figures are distorted because “the industry loaded up on salaried employees during this period, increasing their proportion of the total workforce from 12 percent in 1942 to 31 percent by 1982” (122). Yet his own Table A shows that the change in proportions was largely due to declining

numbers of wage laborers (the source of their increased productivity, of which he is justly proud) and not a huge increase in salaried employees. With the exception of the boom years from 1965 to 1970, when salaried employment averaged 129 thousand, from 1956 to 1980 salaried employment averaged 115 thousand and only fluctuated within 4 percent on either side of it. Similarly, once he had shown that conventional journalists had gotten the story wrong by relying too heavily on the anecdotes of retired middle-managers, he didn’t need to conclude by charging them with “chicken-shit Presbyterianism.” Really, debunking their myths should be enough.

As for the second issue, whether the proportion of revenues returned to labor were so high as to have one or more debilitating effects on the industry, Metzgar answers “yes,” more or less (136-8), and then quickly changes the subject. He looks instead to all the beneficial changes wrought by all that money flowing into the hands of working people. He treats it as an extension of New Deal policies designed to combat underconsumption due to inadequate income. All of this is very true, but it can’t hide the fact that he said yes. Since he doesn’t go farther, it is hard to tell what message we are supposed to take from this. “We Gutted Steel So Our Children Can Visit Us in Arizona?” Or, “We Sucked the Bastards Dry So . . .” -so what? What would be enough to serve as a justification for destroying an industry?

As an answer to the question he posed in his chapter subhead, “Did the Steelworkers’ Standard of Living Wreck the Industry?,” none of the ancillary benefits matter. The only telling point he makes is that, given the inherent antagonism between capital and labor, and given the absence of a strong mediating influence on the part of government, it is hard to see how things could have turned out differently at the time. That is an important argument, but the chapter is too short for him to develop it enough. The result is a weak conclusion to a chapter that didn’t need to be in the book at all.

Still, although this is not a perfect book, at the heart of it is a compelling portrait. Metzgar has a wonderful way with historical narrative. The story is intrinsically important, and is particularly timely when private-sector union membership has fallen to new lows and we are surrounded by a mendacious market triumphalism. With any luck this book could well serve to reinsert a memory of the importance of strong unionism into America’s narrative of itself. ■

Will Kelley is a DSA member and anthropologist whose dissertation research concerned men and women in audio and video engineering.

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John Cort and the ACTU

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the United Electrical Workers (UE) on that union's Communist leaders. In the heat of the battle, which culminated in the expulsion of the UE and ten other Communist-led unions from the CIO in 1949, he did not hesitate to ally himself with the red-hunters in the House UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Years later he would undergo a change of heart, and say of the ACTU's anti-communist crusade in the 1940s: "We exaggerated the danger, we went overboard, we were un-American and uncharitable, we lost our perspective."

John Cort was involved in overthrowing the Communist leadership of the Newspaper Guild in New York. And in contrast to Father Rice's second thoughts, Cort still thinks the ACTU did the right thing in advocating and working for the expulsion of the Communists throughout the CIO. "Were we wrong?", he has written in an as yet unpublished memoir: "Not under the conditions that prevailed in 1949. Since then the Communist world has split, fragmented and finally imploded. In those days the Soviet bloc stretched unbroken from the Pacific to the heart of Europe [and] the Communist Parties in the world marched in lock step to a cadence dictated by the man in the Kremlin."

Under those circumstances, Cort believed in 1949, and believes today, American Communists were "a clear and present danger to the CIO, not to mention the country. [The] libertarian argument had to yield to the law of self-preservation."

Higgins

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saw, the decisions were made, for better or worse, by actists on their own. They did not take their cue from the bishops. One exception to this determined autonomy was the situation in Detroit, where ACTU worked hand in hand with Archbishop Edward Mooney. Mooney, though, was a progressive, and it would be, at the very least, gross overstatement to call him a union red-baiter. Mooney's alliance with ACTU and organized labor eventually led him into a confrontation with his best-known priest, one that illustrates the church's encounter with the labor problem.

Father Charles Coughlin, the powerful priest of the nation's airwaves, was closely identified with the cause of organized labor because of his early support of the movement. But when the Congress of Industrial Unions arrived on the scene in the late 1930s, he turned into one of its bitter detractors. In radio sermon after radio sermon, Coughlin charged that the CIO — and its affiliate, the auto workers — had fallen into the hands of communists. John L. Lewis, the illustrious founder of the CIO, came in for especially harsh criticism for not expelling communists from CIO ranks. Coughlin went so far as to help organize a separate union of Ford workers that would be more agreeable to management, although this quixotic venture was short-lived.

Ironically, the ACTU did not long survive the demise of its Communist enemy in the labor movement. By the mid-1950s tactical differences had led the large Detroit chapter to disaffiliate from the organization, while other chapters lapsed into inactivity. By the start of the 1960s only the original New York chapter still functioned, and by the early 1970s it too was gone.

The Association of Catholic Trade Unionists has yet to receive anything like full or balanced historical scrutiny. Historians of American labor have examined its organizational history chiefly through the prism of the CIO's battle over communism, a viewpoint which has not served, for the most part, to enhance the ACTU's reputation. While this writer sympathizes more with Father Rice's criticisms than John Cort's defense of the ACTU's role within the CIO in the late 1940s, Cort is absolutely right in his insistence that there is more to the history of the group than its contribution — for better or worse — to the anti-communist crusade. Today, as in the 1930s, a large proportion of the urban workforce consists of recent - and unorganized - Catholic immigrants and their children. Perhaps the vision of social justice promoted by John Cort and his fellow ACTU founders during the Great Depression, and the strategies they pursued to realize their vision, may be worth a fresh look from a new generation of labor activists as well as historians. ■

Maurice Isserman is the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of History at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York. His most recent book is The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington (Public Affairs Press, 2000).

At the time, ACTU chapters in Detroit and elsewhere were urging its members to rebut the anti-union broadcasts of Coughlin and his diatribes against the CIO in particular. While Mooney, too, lent his support to the CIO, he was more cautious in his handling of Coughlin, a pastor in the Detroit archdiocese. For one thing, the archbishop realized that he could make a martyr out of Coughlin by coming down too hard on him. Furthermore, no one knew how the unsteady Coughlin, with his enormous and dedicated following, would react to a move against him by Mooney. (Douglas Fraser, former president of the United Auto Workers, once mentioned to me that when he was a boy, Coughlin's Sunday broadcasts were sacred in his family. When the radio priest came on, everything in his home came to a stop. Fraser recalls that this was true of his entire neighborhood.) The idea of Coughlin, directly or indirectly, stirring up a public outcry against his own archbishop was not unthinkable.

Mooney, however, found an opening at the time of a nationwide strike by Chrysler workers in 1939. Coughlin, who called for Chrysler workers to go back to work, made the mistake of quoting from *Quadragesimo Anno* — out of context. In describing the fascist system in Italy, the encyclical by Pius XI stated that strikes are forbidden. The encyclical did not say that strikes should be forbidden; it

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Higgins

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simply said that under the fascist system, they are forbidden. It was a declarative statement. Coughlin, however, took it as an admonitory statement — that workers should never strike — and he turned it against the United Auto Workers. This gave Mooney an opening because the matter involved not mere political judgment but church teaching, which he had to uphold as archbishop.

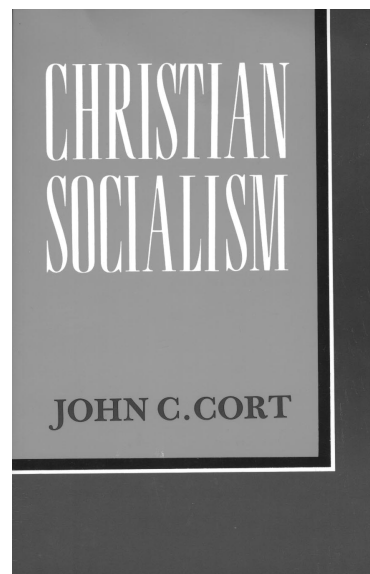
Mooney instructed Father Raymond Clancy, his social-action vicar, and Paul Weber, editor of the Wage Earner, to buy radio time to respond to Coughlin's attacks on the striking Chrysler workers. In his broadcast Father Clancy adopted ACTU's argument that Coughlin had repeatedly misrepresented Catholic social teaching. The message of disapproval sent by Coughlin's own archbishop amounted to one large step in the radio priest's eventual downfall.

Such an episode in the Catholic engagement with labor would be hard to find in the volumes of revisionist history. It does not fit neatly into the thesis of a "conservative" church that joined the labor struggle merely to oppose communism or, worse yet, to serve narrow, institutional interests. And yet, action for the genuine progress of labor was the rule rather than the exception in the Catholic social action movement. It defined the church's relationship to organized labor during the movement's formative battles for recognition. ▀

In closing, let me pay tribute to John Cort as an outstanding exemplar of lay Catholic involvement in the field of labor-management relations.

Monsignor George G. Higgins served for thirty-six years in the Social Action Department of the United States Catholic Conference and twenty-five of those years as director. He has taught at the Catholic University of America and served as chair of the United Auto Workers' Public Review Board and the United Farm Workers' Martin Luther King, Jr. Fund.

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