

Up and At 'Em!

Labor Historian Nelson Lichtenstein Explores the Decline of American Unions, And the Steps To Be Taken if They Are To Regain Their Former Influence

State of the Union: A Century of American Labor

By Nelson Lichtenstein

Princeton, 322 pages, \$24.95.

By **PAUL FRYMER**

Downtown Texarkana has seen better days. Two Wal-Marts stand guard over the nearby interstate, making sure that exiled local businesses never return to this little city along the Texas-Arkansas border. Underneath fading billboards of a recently departed minor-league hockey team stands the Ross Perot Theater (he's a favorite son), with posted instructions to leave firearms at the door, and a prison. But in between the pawnshops and boarded-up storefronts lies a great little catfish restaurant, a perfect spot to sit and read Nelson Lichtenstein's "State of the Union: A Century of American Labor," a wide-ranging meditation on the rise and decline of the American labor movement.

Lichtenstein, a professor of history at the University of California at Santa Barbara, is both a leading labor historian — perhaps the most important of modern labor history — as well as a community organizer and a founder of Scholars, Artists, and Writers for Social Justice. Spanning nearly a century of labor history, his book argues that because unions today represent only a third of the workers they did 50 years ago, corporate power has expanded, unchecked, through small towns and large cities alike. The decline of unions has produced greater inequalities of wealth, fewer workplace protections and a less vibrant civic society. As the collective rights of workers have diminished, so has workplace democracy. Today's worker is less active in the daily affairs of his or her job. Community and a sense of solidarity have been replaced by the economic bottom line, which translates as longer work hours for less pay, less say and less security.

Ironically, Lichtenstein argues, union decline has gone hand in hand with the exploding "rights consciousness" of the 1960s. Since that decade, the collective labor rights that used to afford workers a modicum of protection have been replaced by civil and individual employment rights. By and large, Americans have embraced laws against racial and gender discrimination, as well as rights for the elderly and the disabled. At the same time, they've grown indifferent to the lost rights of unionizing and union workers. But, as Lichtenstein shows, the fate of rights we do care about — of race, gender, age and disability — is intimately linked to the fate of rights we don't care about. For instance, at a Sprint office in San Francisco during the early 1990s, Latina employees suffered

humiliating indignities. They had to raise their hands and ask permission to go to the bathroom. Supervisors regulated their access to drinking water. Wages were low. When they tried to organize a union in order to advance their rights, as women and as Latinas, they were fired. But where black workers at Shoney's were able to win \$132 million in a highly publicized racial discrimination suit against the popular Southern restaurant chain in 1993, the unionizing Latinas ended up with nothing.

Managers at the Texarkana restaurant offer inadvertent proof of Lichtenstein's point. Across a table of fried catfish, hush puppies and lemonade, they tell me that their employees work 50 hours a week for 40 hours' pay, at minimum wage, with no benefits. These managers don't fear union organizers; there aren't many, if any, around to fear. But they do fear lawsuits, and grumbled frequently to me during my summer stay in Texarkana about the possibility of workers filing discrimination claims against them.

Lichtenstein blames much of this dismal state of affairs on organized labor's own mistakes. He reserves his greatest venom for labor's unimaginative, anti-intellectual and shortsighted leaders. Repeatedly characterized by Lichtenstein as "an ex-plumber," George Meany, who led the AFL-CIO from 1955 to 1979, gets the roughest treatment. Meany and his cronies, argues Lichtenstein, sought only to protect labor's gains from the 1930s and 1940s. They limited union democracy, accepted internal corruption and racism, and often sided with anti-union employers, sacrificing long-term membership growth for short-term financial gain. Though they reaped and consumed the benefits of labor's insurrectionary past, they actively repressed its radical present — purging Communists, discouraging strikes and stifling protests.

Lichtenstein certainly understands the external obstacles American trade unions have faced: powerful corporations, right-wing politicians, a globalization that lures companies abroad, racism and hostility to unions in the South and anti-communism. But he does not dwell on these factors. Nor does he think they are determinative. And this is the chief shortcoming of his book. In his 1995 biography of "Walter Reuther: The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit," Lichtenstein showed an acute awareness of the constraints that labor leaders face and how their decisions are shaped by historical context. In "State of the Union," he seems uninterested in these factors, except in passing. While he devotes almost an entire chapter to the role of liberal and radical intellectuals in labor's decline, he gives not even a paragraph to many of labor's leading political foes — from the red-baiting Martin Dies to the union-member-turned-union-buster Ronald Reagan.

Many intellectuals today believe that the civil rights movement and the broader 1960s legacy of rights consciousness have crippled the labor movement, or at least the white working class. Unlike these scholars and journalists, Lichtenstein rightly refuses to blame blacks, women and gays for labor's demise or to separate race from class in his promotion of future labor strategies. But by focusing so insistently on sharp dichotomies between civil rights and labor rights, between individual protection and collective solidarity, he exaggerates the strength and viability of civil-rights protections and, more important, overlooks the determined antagonism and strength of civil rights opponents. After all, big-ticket discrimination victories over Shoney's are as rare as the Teamsters' dramatic

trouncing of UPS in 1997. Employers in Texarkana may complain about discrimination laws, but restaurant managers here are all still white and male. And that is because all contemporary movements for social change — whether of race or class, gender or disability — are on the run, pursued by powerful interests, marginalized by big-money politics, constrained by laws and ideologies that frown upon activism and protest. As a remedy for labor's state of disrepair, Lichtenstein proposes a return to "an autonomous, democratic unionism in the workplace." He argues that increasing internal democracy, militancy and independent politics can help unions regain their lost power. This is a good start, and John J. Sweeney's new leadership at the AFL-CIO has made some progress in these areas. But union power will never be restored without broader political and economic reform. Even with the best of ideas from a Reuther, Sweeney or Lichtenstein, unions face an uphill battle absent systematic change to labor law and American politics.