

Michael Goldfield: *The Decline of Organized Labor in the United States*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987; paperback 1989.

In his introduction, Michael Goldfield poses the question: Why are unions in such trouble today? What are the reasons behind the dramatic losses in union membership, particularly in the private sector? The book is an attempt to answer the question. Goldfield summarizes his arguments in the following way: Three factors, in the context of the changing relations of class forces, have contributed to union problems.

1. A growing offensive of United States capitalists that has enjoyed increased success in defeating attempts at new union organizing.
2. Changes in public policy tending to favor the employers.
3. An inability, and even an unwillingness, of American labor unions to devote the energies and resources necessary to combat effectively declines in their membership or in their general influence.

The author offers his explanation for why these three factors are important. His thesis is that the decline should be sought in the weaknesses that were inherent in the last great upsurge of American labor, from the late thirties to the mid-fifties.

First of all he points out that union strength in the United States is *regional*. There are strong union traditions in the Northeast, the Midwest, and the West Coast. But the other side of this coin is the South and the Southwest. The trade unions' lack of political strength on the national level is a reflection of this situation. He points to the failure of "Operation Dixie," the organizing drive in the immediate post-World War II era, as the most important cause of this. Among reasons for the failure, he cites the internal divisions in the labor

movement; the political divisions between the leadership, supporters of the Democratic party, and the middle organizing layers, many of the Communists and Socialists, and the divisions along racial lines. There was not much interest among the Democrat trade union leaders of alienating the Southern Democrats—who were white supremacists, as well as part of the Roosevelt coalition. These problems are seen as still dogging the union movement today. There is no lack of militancy at the local or sectoral level, but strikes at that level seldom gain the support of their own unions, nor do they generate broad support in the labor movement as a whole, and therefore these disputes usually end in defeat. Goldfield exemplifies this by referring to the conflicts involving PATCO, Phelps-Dodge, and Hormel.<sup>1</sup> The book is the first of two volumes. It sets out to examine the weakened state of labor unions. In the second volume, the author plans to examine the historical-political reasons behind the decline described in the present volume.

All in all, the book is well worth reading. For those looking for an introduction to labor relations in the United States, it gives a good overview of developments in American industrial relations in the post-war era. For those who already are conversant with the topic, it presents an excellent overview of the discussions current in the field.

Goldfield is solidly rooted in the left wing of the American academic community, and his arguments are a coherent presentation, with a number of new analyses, in that tradition. In these days of change, with the Stalinist conceptions of Socialism being swept away, the analyses that are presented here may well stand a good chance of being understood and used in the necessary restructuring of the labor movement in the United States as well as in other areas. For example, I think that his pointing out the importance of regional differentiation as a danger to the American labor movement, should be read and considered by trade unionists in Europe. With the Single Market looming, there are lessons to be learned.

Finally, anyone interested in looking at specific aspects of the American labor movement will find the work tremendously helpful; the bibliography is a goldfield with a very high content of nuggets.

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1 PATCO was the Air Controllers' union, smashed by Reagan in the early 1980s; Phelps-Dodge, a miners' strike in the Southwest in the middle 1980s; and Hormel, the Minnesota-based strike by a local of the Meatpacker's union. These three have come to be seen as symbolic of the state of union decline in recent years.