Barry Eidlin (2018) *Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada*

Judith Stepan-Norris

There is a great deal to like in this carefully researched book. First, it provides a needed broad and long-spanning overview of the evolution of US and Canadian labor relations regimes. This is organized around discussions of existing theories of US and Canadian union density decline with a focus on explaining the gap in US and Canadian density that began in the 1960s and widened throughout the current period. Barry Eidlin evaluates how much of the gap is due to the various factors usually considered when analyzing union density decline (structural factors—like the shift to service and geographical considerations; workers' and public opinion; employers' orientations; labor relations regimes—laws, government institutions and intervention, the role of the courts, strike and replacement worker policies; national characteristics; the role of public sector unions; and the role of political party structures and their histories). Especially because union density has declined in both countries during the last 20 years, it is important to remember that explaining the gap in decline between the two nations is different than explaining union density decline per se: Just because a factor doesn't help to explain the gap doesn't necessarily mean that it doesn't help to explain union decline in general.

Eidlin concludes that much of the gap between US and Canadian union density is explained by the differing labor regimes (institutions, strike and replacement policy, the courts) as well as more uneven regional labor regimes in the United States. Yet explaining why the United States and Canada diverged with regard to the role that these factors played is the more interesting question. His answer to the latter lies in understanding the different party dynamics in the United States and Canada. Briefly, in the United States, the New Deal coalition incorporated labor into the Democratic Party, where labor was relegated to a "special interest" role. This junior partner role meant that labor had to vie with other Democratic Party constituents (including Southern racists) to get them to push for legislation and labor regime change that would be beneficial to workers. It mostly failed to prevail. In contrast the Canadian labor movement had a longer fight to gain its rights, which gave it more resiliency. In the early 1960s it helped to form and subsequently played a large role in a class-based political party (New Democratic Party [NDP]) that fought for and won labor gains in the political arena. All the while, the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) remained more entrenched in the Canadian labor movement.

Having a labor party in Canada, in turn, led to a political context wherein labor had a better chance of making headway. Important outcomes of this context include the following: (1) The extensive and long-term effects of McCarthyism were somewhat muted in Canada. (2) Some politically progressive union leaders were able to hold on to their positions, which gave the labor movement a more progressive character. (3) The Old Left and the New Left enjoyed a much greater partnership thereby

ensuring leadership continuity throughout the decades. And (4) progressive public-sector unions were able to play a larger role in federation-level union leadership (which as a result, maintained more progressive ideals).

This is a sensible and fairly novel argument that leaves the reader convinced that a continuing higher level of union density along with its stabilization in Canada (as opposed to the continuously declining union density in the United States) is largely due to the labor movements' differential role and power in their respective political parties. Eidlin is to be congratulated for this accomplishment! While appreciating these advances, I offer some observations and questions that came to my mind when reading the manuscript.

One general observation is that the book makes the argument that the class idea in Canada is what mattered in the end. Yet we don't get a clear indication of the class actors at work (labor and its allies vs. capital organizations and their allies), vying for the ability to determine the character of the labor regime. In the United States, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) and the Chamber of Commerce appear fleetingly, but are not construed as consistent class leaders. In the analysis of Canada, capitalist class actors are even less visible.

Although the overall conclusions are compelling, some building blocks of the argument need more development. Following are a few relevant questions that could use further evidence and discussion.

First, did US Communist labor leaders alienate their working-class base (Eidlin 2018: 203)? In explaining why US unions are more conservative, Eidlin argues that the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) and CP union leaders lost workers' support during World War II with their zealous advocacy of wartime production standards and the no-strike pledge. Eidlin is not the first scholar to make this claim, yet he doesn't offer or cite empirical evidence to support it. Here are some reasons why this claim might be challenged:

- It assumes that the gap between CP leaders' and workers' positions on the war effort was large enough to explain workers' abandonment; was this the case? The World War II cause received strong national support in the United States, and we would need evidence to determine how Communist Party and its union leaders' rhetoric and actions with regard to these policies differed from the policies that workers in general and Left-leaning workers in particular supported. If workers resented such policies in support of the war effort that also required their sacrifice, why didn't they also resent the more centrist American Federation of Labor (AFL) and Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) leaders who were the ones who agreed to the pledge?
- Wartime strikes might not be an indication that workers opposed the no-strike pledge. One might argue that the incidence of wartime strikes (which dropped significantly in 1942, then rose again) is proof of workers' disagreement with a no-strike pledge. Yet when workers engaged in specific strikes for very tangible reasons, those actions don't necessarily mean that they opposed a general no-strike pledge in defense of wartime production to defeat the Nazis. Also note that workers largely adhered to the pledge at the start of US involvement in the war.

- Communist rhetoric may have flip-flopped and offended workers. What do we know about how distinctive it was from that of other leaders? Was rhetoric enough to alienate workers from them? Other scholars have emphasized the negative effects of strong CP leader rhetoric in support of the war effort; a systematic comparison of CP versus other union leaders' rhetoric on the wartime sacrifice would be telling.
- Other labor leaders engaged in seemingly alienating actions, why didn't those likewise elicit workers' abandonment? Let's concede for the sake of argument that CP union leader rhetoric was more extreme in support of the war effort, and that workers resented that rhetoric. How is it that such unpopular rhetoric on the part of these elected union leaders who previously "delivered the goods" and enjoyed widespread worker support, could be enough to alienate workers from their previously trusted and effective leaders? There are many examples of other trusted and effective union leaders who took unpopular positions but didn't suffer significant alienation/abandonment by workers (e.g., John L. Lewis broke with Franklin D. Roosevelt and supported the Republican Party candidate, Wendell Wilkie, in 1940; Lewis broke with the CIO in 1942, moving the United Mine Workers Union into independent union status, and later reaffiliated with the AFL in 1944; and the CIO, in the wake of the Taft-Hartley Act, expelled the Communist-dominated unions, chartered rival unions, and then raided [along with other AFL unions] the now independent unions). Why did CP union leaders' rhetoric alienate workers to the point that workers abandoned them forever while the impactful actions of other leaders didn't?
- The US CP union leaders were in line with mainstream labor leaders with regard to their support of the no-strike pledge. Yet in Canada, the mainstream labor leaders rebuffed the no-strike pledge (ibid.: 234), while the CPC "pursued a similar wartime Popular Front policy as in the United States—even though the federal government banned it in 1940. This included support for the no-strike pledge, [and] production speedup." These policies more sharply isolated the CPC from the mainstream labor movement than the CPUSA was alienated from the CIO and AFL. Why didn't the CPC's more extreme departure from the mainstream labor position on the no-strike pledge serve to alienate Canadian workers from it more deeply?
- What's more important to workers: rhetoric or action? Did CP union leaders' actual wartime policies, actions, and accomplishments alienate US workers? When we consider what labor leaders were doing on the ground floor, in the shops, mines, and mills, what do we find? Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (2003: 121–58) examined a sample of California collective bargaining agreements and found that Communist-led CIO unions accomplished a great deal on workers' behalf with regard to shop floor power, even during the war period. They find that CP leaders did not abandon workers' interests, and to the contrary, they were significantly more likely to sign wartime proworkers collective bargaining agreements (ones that didn't cede management prerogatives, didn't cede the right to strike, included more beneficial grievance procedures, and had shorter terms).

Overall, I don't think there is an argument that the Communist-led Left in the United States exasperated workers more than did the Communist-led Left in Canada, or that it did so more than mainstream labor leaders. In fact, I would argue that the CP-led progressive wing of the CIO maintained worker support and offered the most hope for a US class-based response to capitalist power through the late 1940s. The more severe purge of the Communist Left in the United States, along with its ineffective postpurge strategies (ibid.: 266–327), together explain their inability to continue their effective union leadership role in the United States.

Next, let's consider a few other building block arguments. Eidlin argues that the long-term effects of the McCarthy period were experienced more sharply in the United States, where it severed the links between labor and the Left and the links between the old and new Left (ibid.: 206). Conversely, these long-term outcomes didn't manifest in Canada. The crucial difference between the two, he argues, hinged on two factors: the Taft-Hartley Act in the United States that banned Communist participation in union leadership (with no Canadian equivalent) and who it was that took authority over the purge (ibid.: 196 and following). I agree that in the United States, the Taft-Hartley Act's non-Communist affidavit decimated the strong position of Communist-led unions. With regard to the agents of the purge, in the United States it was maverick political entrepreneurs (McCarthy and his allies) and agents of the state (e.g., J. Edgar Hoover and NLRB, by virtue of its enforcement of excluding unions whose leaders didn't sign the affidavit from participating in their elections) that accounts for extreme oppression. The AFL and CIO initially discussed whether or not they should adhere to the non-Communist affidavit; both left it to individual unions to decide. Later the CIO cut its losses and expelled the "Communist-dominated" unions from its midst. It followed by establishing rival unions and intensely raiding the expelled unions. In Canada, it was the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) Labor Party, which could and did deliver a milder version of the purge. Communist union leaders were able to hang on during the milder purge because there was no explicit exclusion of CP leaders from union leadership as there was in the Taft-Hartley Act in the United States. This is a convincing argument. But how did the CCF manage to maintain progressive workers' confidence when it was the official face of the left-wing purge? In particular, how did progressive Canadian workers reconcile their support for the CCF with this regressive role in the destructive purge?

Another subargument is that, in the United States, the AFL and CIO were not as different as they are often thought to be (ibid.: 144–45). Eidlin argues that the AFL was more progressive (closer to the CIO) than it is usually portrayed (by pointing to some of AFL President William Green's progressive policies, reminding us that there were some progressive AFL union leaders [Dubinsky and Randolph—who moved the independent Railroad brotherhoods into the AFL in 1936]), and that early on, the AFL participated in working-class movements in cities. He rightly credits race with a bigger dividing role in the United States than in Canada, but by my estimation, understates the progress that the CIO (steered by the CP-led unions) was able to make on that and other fronts. There are many ways that the CIO, and especially the CIO Left, advanced the progressive cause. Just by virtue of its industrial (as opposed to craft-based)

structure, it was more inclusive, seeking to represent all workers, regardless of race, gender, religion, and so forth. CIO Communist-led unions were more democratic (as were CIO unions more likely to be democratic than AFL unions), they did more to fight for gender and African American worker equity among workers (as CIO unions were also more likely than AFL unions to guarantee membership to eligible workers regardless of race) and to incorporate them into leadership positions (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003: 159–265) than did other unions. These factors distinguished the two US labor federations in fundamental ways.

In an attempt to explain the different US and Canadian trajectories, Eidlin points toward a coherence between the Old Left and the New Left in Canada that was missing in the United States after mid-century. He notes that continuity held in the early part of the century (ibid.: 198–99): Knights of Labor (KoL) leaders later participated in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the IWW leaders later participated in the CP and CIO unions. But once the CPUSA was purged and discredited, there was no role for continuity between Old Left and New Left leaders. This may well be true, but he provides only anecdotal evidence in support of this claim of the earlier connection in the United States. It seems reasonable that there would be some continuity between the KoL and IWW, and one could find examples of individuals who participated in both, but we don't have systematic information on the extent of early movement leadership continuity for the United States. Using mainly historical sources, I attempted to find a systematic link between IWW presence in an industry and CIO unions, but was unable to do so (this may be because there is no link or it could be because systematic information for all unions was not available). But Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin (2003: 24–53) did find a systematic link between the existence of Trade Union Unity League (TUUL) unions in an industry and the likelihood of the CP winning leadership in the corresponding CIO unions. This at least provides a connection between the legacy of TUUL unions and CIO leadership. But in *Labor and the Class Idea*, we don't have much evidence of leadership continuity between older and newer Left organizations in the United States or Canada. Nor do we have evidence that the US Old Leftists that did participate in the New Left largely abandoned their independent class politics. The US New Left connection to the Old Left would be interesting to explore, especially in light of the information provided by Eidlin on the "turn to the working class" segment of the New Left and the various internal union democratization movements.

Eidlin rightly devotes considerable space to discussing the right to strike and the rights of replacement workers in understanding the gap. He also argues that when labor leaders help to squelch strikes, they drive a wedge between themselves and rank-and-file workers, thereby undermining labor's mobilizing capacity and reinforcing its reliance on government action to achieve gains (ibid.: 234). This is used to explain why US labor leaders lost their class mobilizing potential in the immediate postwar period. Yet Canadian labor leaders assumed a similar enforcement role with regard to purging CPC union leaders and with their later strike enforcement role. In Canada, union recognition and strike suppression are intertwined. Canada's Rand Formula of 1948 traded mandatory dues check off (for members and nonmembers) for government supervised strike votes prior to strikes between contracts, no strikes during the contract, and union discipline of illegal strikers. Why then

didn't this union antistrike enforcement role undermine Canadian labor's mobilizing capacity?

With regard to the right to strike and replacement workers rights in both countries, Canada has in recent decades reinforced workers' right to strike and weakened replacement workers rights. In the United States, the right to strike is for all intents and purposes nonexistent and replacement workers' rights have been expanded over the years. But Eidlin's figure 2.15 shows that Canadian strikes have declined severely since 1980 (although not quite as drastically as in the United States). What is the mechanism by which the right to strike builds union density even in the absence of the exercise of that right? With regard to replacement workers' rights, it is important to note that these rights only matter when employers can find replacements. Where the workers are skilled, have the advantage of timing, or have geographical isolation, competent, competent and willing replacements can't be readily found, and so the rights of the replacement worker may be less important.

When discussing Right to Work laws, Eidlin argues that they are associated with union density but that the causal direction is difficult to determine (all Southern US states, which have been historically difficult to organize, have Right to Work laws). In a series of articles and new book, Dixon (2020) demonstrates how after World War II, state-based business mobilizations used Right to Work laws to chip away at US unions' rights in the industrial heartland even during the height of labor's strength there. This movement eventually contributed to the decline of overall US union density. Right to Work laws restrict union security, making it more difficult for unions to maintain members. While they are easier to pass in antiunion states, they may contribute to further decline once passed anywhere.

I will end by thanking Eidlin for raising an interesting and provocative point regarding the Canadian member exodus from US unions in the 1970s, which deserves more attention. Here are some questions it raises: What was the number of Canadian union members that left their US unions? How did the exodus affect US union membership (not density)? Was it concentrated in certain unions (like the United Auto Workers)? How did the Canadian voice matter in US unions before they left and how did Canadian members' exit matter?

Again, I want to thank Eidlin for providing such a well-researched, informative, engaging, and provocative book to the labor relations literature.

References

Dixon, Marc (2020) Heartland Blues: Labor Rights in the Industrial Midwest. Oxford University Press.
Eidlin, Barry (2018) Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada. Cambridge University Press.
Stepan-Norris, Judith, and Maurice Zeitlin (2003) Left Out: Reds and America's Industrial Unions. Cambridge University Press.

Judith Stepan-Norris' research centers on social movements with a predominant focus on the U.S. labor movement (union structure, leadership, and democracy and the workers who join unions). She has also analyzed and published articles (with Jasmine Kerrissey and Ben Lind) regarding the UCI ADVANCE program's efficacy in enhancing gender equity in higher education and on the Los Angeles renters' movement (with Ben Lind).

Her co-authored work with Maurice Zeitlin focuses on U.S. unions affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations from the 1930s through the mid-1950s (Left Out: Reds and America's Industrial Unions) and on

the organization of the United Automobile Workers Union at the Ford Motor Company's River Rouge plant (Talking Union). Other research (with Caleb Southworth) analyzes unions' and churches' impact on their neighborhoods and the relevance of rival unionism for change in union density. She also has co-authored articles on the AFL-CIO's Union Summer program and the role of autoworkers' workplace networks. With Jasmine Kerrissey, she is working on a book to synthesize and analyze data collected through an NSF funded project on union density throughout the entire 20th century.

Several of her publications have been recognized with awards, including those from the American Sociological Association, the Society for the Study of Social Problems, and the University of California, Irvine. The National Science Foundation, the American Sociological Association, the UC Institute for Labor and Employment, and the University of California, Irvine have funded her various projects

Response to Critics for *Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada* Book Symposium

Barry Eidlin

First, I would like to thank Cedric de Leon, Nelson Lichtenstein, and Judith Stepan-Norris for their deep and thoughtful engagement with my book. I benefited tremendously from their work and mentorship as I developed this project, so it is particularly gratifying to have them discuss the finished product.

Naturally I appreciate my discussants' plaudits, and perhaps even more the way each placed my book in dialogue with their own research agendas. However, the purpose of an author's response is to answer their criticisms. Unsurprisingly, each discussant managed to zero in on precisely the elements of my analysis over which I struggled the most in the course of researching and writing the book: labor-Left relations, the character of labor's relation to the state in both countries, and of course, the question of race. While space does not allow a systematic response to every single criticism, I will do my best to address the most salient points.

In writing *Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada,* I tried to create what Bill Sewell calls an "eventful history" of labor's divergent trajectories in both countries (Sewell 1996). That means a history in which events matter, both in the sense that they are not predetermined, and that they are shaped by past events, while also shaping subsequent events. This is particularly important in the context of the US-Canada comparison, where there is a tendency to point to deep, lasting differences between the countries to explain their diverging trajectories.

All three of my discussants offer exemplary models of eventful history in their own work. Indeed, the work of all three was central in helping me develop my own eventful analysis. And yet, we see in their responses to my book how hard it is to resist the appeal to enduring divides, or to neglect the relation between previous and subsequent events.

We see this in Lichtenstein's discussion of employer hostility. Echoing seminal work by Susan Jacoby (1991) and others, he emphasizes the singular ferocity of US employer hostility across time. I present evidence in the book suggesting that Canadian employers were exceedingly hostile as well, except that they ultimately