

The Emergence of a UAW Local

Book review

Peter Rachleff

1976

A review of *The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936–1939: A study in class and culture* by Peter Friedlander

There are few books which provide an inside view of the early years of CIO organization, and even fewer of them are as rich as this study. For this reason alone it is well worth reading. Nevertheless, this book is seriously flawed. Yet it is in the flaws themselves that the most important questions arise, questions which must be posed, paused over, and answered. This review is intended to explore these areas, hopefully to stimulate discussion and debate.

I would first like to touch briefly on a number of matters well-demonstrated by Friedlander:

1) It makes little sense to talk of “the” workers in a specific social setting. Rather, the experiences, backgrounds, present situations, attitudes, etc., which divide workers into various groups must be taken into account, particularly when we are examining their practice and attitudes towards something like the organization of a union, a strike, or even a revolution.

2) Of the various groups in the shop examined (a parts plant of some 450 workers, located in Hamtramck between 1936 and 1939), one emerged as the most pro-union, undertaking themselves the tasks of organizing, and finally managing, UAW Local 229. This group stood out from the other groups both culturally and ideologically. They were “rational, calculating, aggressive, self-disciplined, and possessed of an impulse for self-improvement. The political form that these characteristics took could be described as a kind of social democracy, linked uncertainly at first to the New Deal as its left wing.” (p.101)

3) The union itself remained largely a product of the activity of the minority, while a good half of the plant’s workers remained passive or even hostile. This “cadre” (as Friedlander calls them) controlled the organizing drive and provided the leadership of the union after recognition. They had considerable power autonomous from the visions, desires, and control of the rest of the workers. (pp. 93–98)

4) The activist “cadre” found the key to its eventual success in wresting authority within the plant away from management. Through a series of struggles over several years, the union implanted itself as the sole authority on the shop floor, gradually wooing most workers away from deference to management to a new relationship of deference to the union leadership. What did the union do with this authority? Friedlander writes with enthusiasm:

“By the middle of the war years the company had completely lost control of the production process. The union set up a group incentive system which made it impossible for an individual to compete with his fellow workers. Moreover, unlike many other incentive systems (which were really speedups), the 229 plan was run by the workers themselves, and it led to a situation in which ten hours’ pay was received in return for a maximum of six and a half hours’ work. Often these hours were considerably reduced. In order to accomplish this, however, it was not sufficient to exercise the negative power of the strike or slowdowns. Increased productivity was required. Workers’ control, increased productivity,

and a relatively nonrepressive system of in-plant relationships constituted the three social and political pillars on which the system rested. The union took over all managerial functions on the shop floor.” (p.91)

In short, the union became rooted in the plant once it became the efficient manager of labor-power for capital. (A point missed by Friedlander).

5) The first real test of the union’s authority came in a series of struggles not against management, but against other workers. Here, I shall focus only on the problems faced by the union in dealing with a group of young press-operators, who persisted in engaging in wildcat strikes following the signing of the first contract. This group seemed “nihilistic, narrow in their perspectives, and, if self-sacrificing as individuals, they sometimes appeared in union conflicts to be self-centered as a group.” (p.101) Their activity ran counter to the stability and authority sought by the union.

Kord, union president during the ’36-’39 period, said of them: “They thought that every demand was legitimate, anything was possible.” (p.98)

“The union in its role of manager of labor-power, had to convince these young workers that everything was not possible, and that proper channels had to be followed. As Kord saw it, the wildcats did not always fit in with the best interests of the union ... (The union leaders thought that this method of handling grievances was (quoting Kord): ‘rather harmful to the organization and its broader goals; for one thing, it exploited and magnified the problems of a small group of people when we could be handling their problems and everybody else’s problems through the organized channels.’” (p. 76)

In short, the assertion of the authority of the union was counter-posed to direct action, to any workers trying to collectively and directly address their problems. Such activity disrupted the stability of the shop, perhaps even called the union’s efficacy into question. Fortunately for the leadership “Cadre”, one of its members remained popular with the wildcatting group, and it was his role to “mollify” them. As Kord put it: “They listened to him, he would give them some kind of moral dispensation.” (p. 78)

The above five points seem incontestable, though Friedlander’s own assessment of them differs somewhat from mine. Why we have these differences, and how much larger problems open up is the subject I would like to turn to next. There are three key areas where this study demands response, areas which are inter-related as the building blocks of a larger vision.

1) Friedlander’s perspective in the book is that of the organizers of the local—who, through a series of interviews, provided much of the information on which the book is based. All the rest of the workers in the shop are seen through the eyes of this man, who looked at them with one question in mind: how to get them to join the union. If they were reticent to join—or acted disruptively after joining—there was something wrong with them. For the most part Kord (and his chronicler Friedlander) finds their shortcomings in their social backgrounds (a matter discussed more fully below).

The key question of the book is the relationship of these other workers to a specific project, the organization of a union. Yet only one side of this relationship is ever probed. The project itself is never questioned. Moreover, while the actions of the leadership “cadre” are assessed through first-hand accounts, the rest of the workers (the vast majority) are assessed according to criteria of a different order—how they appeared to the leadership “cadre”. None of these workers, whether wildcatter, pro-company, or passive, were interviewed so that we might find out how they felt about this.

2) Which brings me to a second major problem—the explanations offered by Friedlander and Kord for the actions or inactivity of the other workers in the shop. These men are seen solely as the products of historical circumstances. For example, a major group in the shop which was generally hesitant in its support for unionization consisted of first-generation Polish immigrants. Since these men were largely born in rural villages, they had the attitudes of “peasants”, even though most had experienced industrial work and life before entering the parts plant.

What were these experiences? How long had they lived in Hamtramck? How long had they worked in this plant? How did “peasant” attitudes retain a currency in industrial Detroit, where work patterns, family life, social life, the

yearly calendar, holidays, etc. differed markedly from rural Poland? Such questions are not even posed by Friedlander. He is content to point to their backgrounds (explanations of a similar order are offered for the wildcatters and a group of Appalachians) as the explanation of their social practice and attitudes. (At a later point, he announces with pleasure that eight of ten union activists he studied came from “petty-bourgeois” backgrounds, the lynchpin in his argument for seeing the unionization movement as the left wing of the New Deal).

The major problem raised here is a refusal to recognize the ability of people to change themselves as they encounter new situations and new experiences. He misses the message of work such as E.P. Thompson (*The Making of the English Working-Class*), to wit: the working-class made itself as much as it was made. For Friedlander, once a peasant, always a peasant.

3) Finally, we turn to the sticky questions of “militancy” and “consciousness”. Here, it is most useful to compare the leadership “cadre” and the wildcatting group. Friedlander draws just such a contrast himself, writing:

“The contrast between some of the young volatile workers (who were always ready for a fight) and Kord’s calculating, self-disciplined intellectual approach is striking. The young militants were sometimes ready to throw a foreman over the fence; Kord aimed at establishing an organization that would alter the relationship of power in the plant.” (p. 65–6)

The fact of the matter is that the union organizers sought to establish a new relationship of power in the plant, one with them in authority over production, while the young wildcatters showed by their actions that they sought no authority whatsoever. I am reminded of Huw Beynon’s comment about a similar group of workers in a modern British auto plant: “This denial is so fundamental that it has nothing to do with trade unionism.” (*Working For Ford*, Penguin, p. 140).

Not surprisingly, the wildcatting group never produced a candidate for union office. Nor did they seem to understand the nature of contracts. As Kord described one stoppage to Friedlander: “You go in to negotiate. The guys are standing by the presses. ‘What’s the grievance?’ you ask. ‘Production is too high,’ answers a spokesman. ‘These guys feel they should be getting more money at this machine over there because of the nature of the work.’ ‘Now wait a minute,’ went a typical reply. ‘We just signed a contract. You can’t go ahead and rediscuss the wages we just agreed to.’” 75)

How does Friedlander seek to understand this activity? He grumbles about the lack of “formal political, programmatic—or organizational efforts... no planning... no meetings, no caucuses...” (p. 77). Moreover, “if one weakness of the wildcat tendency lay in its inability to produce a full-blown leader who directly and unambiguously expressed it, another was found in the limitation of its appeal to the youngest workers in the plant—workers who had yet to fully leave behind their adolescent associations and social perspective.” (p. 79) And their dreams and spirit, I am tempted to add!

Are workers truly at their strongest when they produce strong leaders? The idiocy of such a notion was shown by Michael Velli, in his *Manual for Revolutionary Leaders* (see Part II, “The Rise to Leadership”). Perhaps the real reason the wildcatters remained “historically inarticulate” (Friedlander’s term) was that the only overt expression of their activities would have been the destruction of their factory, the dismantling of their presses, the suppression of their monotonous jobs, and the creation of a new society unlike any ever seen before.

This question never occurs to Friedlander, nor to most labor historians. His application to “critical theory” remains within narrow bounds, bounds which seem inevitable, impenetrable, when we look back at the past with the knowledge of what has followed it in history. What of the missed possibilities, the shattered dreams, the broken lives? We can never discover them, let alone learn from them, as long as we restrict ourselves to the perspectives of those whose dreams were realized, dreams which have become nightmares for others, for us.

See letter response by Deborah Nathan and reply by Peter Rachleff, Issue 278, November 1976.

fifth Estate

Peter Rachleff
The Emergence of a UAW Local
Book review
1976

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/275-august-1976/the-emergence-of-a-uaw-local>
Fifth Estate #275, August, 1976

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)