

The Left in the Detroit Labour Movement

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Volume 26, 1990

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t26re02>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Glaberman, M. (1990). The Left in the Detroit Labour Movement. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 26, 165–170.

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Christopher H. Johnson, *Maurice Sugar: Law, Labor, and the Left in Detroit, 1912-1950* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1988).

Margaret Collingwood Nowak, *Two Who Were There: A Biography of Stanley Nowak* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1989).

THE ROLE OF COMMUNISTS in the history of the North American Labor movement has always been controversial. In recent years some balance has been restored to that history by the growing body of work by and about Communists who were middle-level leaders in the CIO unions and a few studies that deal more broadly with their activities. Balanced, of course, does not mean less controversial. It simply means that more information and more points of view are being made available.

Christopher Johnson's biography of Maurice Sugar is a solid piece of work that fills a major gap in the history of the United Automobile Workers (UAW). Sugar grew up in northern Michigan and studied law at the University of Michigan before World War I. At the university he joined the socialist movement, becoming essentially a Debsian socialist. He served time in prison for his opposition to the war (failure to register for the draft). After the war, with the rightward movement of the Socialist Party, he left the Party and generally gravitated toward the Communists, although Johnson makes a convincing case that he never joined the CP and was organizationally independent.

He was, from the start, a lawyer for the labour movement and remained that for most of the rest of his life. He gained a substantial reputation among Detroit unions for his abilities and his fairness. He was able to take advantage of whatever technicalities the law allowed but he was not simply a technician. His loyalty to the labour movement was widely respected. In the 1930s he became chief counsel for the UAW and remained in that post until fired by Walter Reuther on his accession to power. He was associated with the Addes-CP caucus and was a major advisor to what was then called the "left wing" in the union.

Johnson's description of Sugar's union activities and legal battles make fascinating reading. There are, however, certain limitations to Johnson's book. The

Martin Glaberman, "The Left in the Detroit Labour Movement," *Labour/Le Travail*, 26 (Fall 1989), 165-170.

first is that the author is totally uncritical of his subject. He has a tendency to speak for Sugar without any documentation to support his guess as to Sugar's views. He also avoids questions which could cast less than the best light on Sugar. For example, Sugar is presented throughout the book as a major fighter for workers' rights and civil liberties. In the post-World War II period he defended Communists who came under attack and who were imprisoned under the infamous Smith Act. Johnson does not discuss Sugar's involvement in the civil liberties fights that predate the fifties. Thus he does not have to deal with Sugar's relation to the first prosecutions under the Smith Act in 1941 — the conviction of Trotskyists and Teamster unionists in Minneapolis. He attacks the role of the Communist Party in supporting the government's attack on the Trotskyists under a law which was later used against them. About Sugar he is silent. But Sugar's silence and refusal to attack the prosecution of the Trotskyists does tarnish his reputation as a civil libertarian.

Similarly, the discussion of the visit of the Sugars to the Soviet Union in 1932 is rather one-sided. "Sugar was not alone in being impressed with what he saw in the Soviet Union. Walter and Victor Reuther, for example, two young, searching, socialist idealists, would make the trip the following year, ... and come away thoroughly impressed." (134-5) This is the only time Johnson has anything nice to say about Walter Reuther, but what is more important is that there were a lot of people on the left, including foreign workers in the USSR, who were critical of the totalitarian dictatorship and its treatment of workers long before Khrushchev's famous 1956 speech.¹ The fact that Johnson does not feel it necessary to indicate that Sugar may have been blinded by ideological glasses is an indication of one of the limitations of the book.

Another limitation is Johnson's naivete about the nature of radical politics, in both theory and practice. In discussing Reuther's possible membership, for a brief period, in the CP, Johnson insists that it does not really matter. "Leftists worked together." (180) He seems unaware of the bitter infighting that characterized the Left in this period. What kept much of this infighting hidden was the need to organize workers into the fledgling UAW and the need to win and keep support of union members who would not likely be moved by sectarian needs. Two examples illustrate this, one old, one recent.

There is in the Wayne State University Labor Archives a photograph of a demonstration of the Women's Emergency Brigade, arranged and published by Henry Kraus, a Communist who edited the Flint UAW paper and authored a book on the Flint sit-down strike, *The Many and the Few*. At the head of the parade was a line of women, including Genora Johnson Dollinger, the founder and leader of the Brigade. In front of these women is a single woman who seems to be leading everyone. She was not a member of the Brigade but a CPer planted there by Kraus to give the impression of the Party's involvement in the Women's Brigade. Johnson, who relies on Kraus's book, seems unaware of this kind of stacking of

¹ Andrea Graziosi, "Foreign Workers in Soviet Russia, 1920-40: Their Experience and Their Legacy," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 33 (Spring 1988), 38-59.

the historical deck, a process that can lead historians astray.

The second example is an indication that the old sectarian attitudes still survive. When I found evidence of Reuther's brief membership in the CP in the papers of Nat Ganley, a leading Communist in the UAW, I sent a brief note to that effect to *Labor History*. The then managing editor, Milton Cantor, refused to publish it on the strange grounds that the journal might be sued (40 years after the event!). He seemed to be concerned that it would be damaging to Reuther. At the same time, Nat Ganley's widow tried to destroy the evidence in the WSU archives. Johnson sees all of this as of little consequence (179, 315), but it is obviously the case that Reuther's relation to the Communist Party mattered historically, both in terms of his actions in the past, and his reputation in the present.²

Johnson also believes that "fellow travellers" such as Sugar influenced the Party as much as it influenced them and that rank-and-file Communists often differed with the Party line. The first is nonsense, the second is true, but of limited meaning. There is no evidence that any resistance by sympathizers or members resulted in any change in the position of the Party. Rank-and-file members may have ignored the Party line to protect their position among their fellow workers, but that is not the same thing. Bob Travis, the CPer who was a major leader in the Flint sit-down strike reported in an interview years later that he and Wyndham Mortimer opposed the absolute support for the no-strike pledge during World War II. Their disagreement was purely tactical: they thought that the Party should have supported compulsory arbitration or some other formula which would have led to the same result without the same right-wing, anti-worker appearance. But, in any case, there was no modification of adherence to the anti-strike position.

A further problem with Christopher Johnson's book is his unfamiliarity with UAW structure and politics. He implies at various times in the book that Walter Reuther was an opportunist. That is easy enough to sustain. But he also implies that the Addes-CP caucus was not, that it may have made mistakes and the CP may have made mistakes, but they were mistakes in judgement, not opportunism. The most outrageous example of this is his statement, "Party policy makers had been very concerned about the impact of red-baiting on the labor movement and had determined on a position of total support for Lewis and the established powers in the CIO.... It sometimes put the Communists in ridiculous positions — like voting for anti-Communist resolutions in union conventions — but it was deemed preferable to taking an ideological stand that might both hurt the labor movement and end toleration of Party activists within it altogether." (237) Change the word "ideological" to "principled," and you get a classic definition of opportunism. I would like to see an explanation from Johnson, or anyone else, how voting against a red-baiting resolution would hurt the labour movement.

Because he cannot see the opportunism of the CP, he misunderstands the relation of the CP to the UAW and CIO leaderships. "The picture we have from

²Martin Glaberman, "A Note on Walter Reuther," *Radical America*, 7 (November-December 1973), 113-7.

Trotskyist writings (Art Preis, Cochran, Glaberman) is that UAW leaders, virtual tools in the hands of 'the Stalinists,' clamped down immediately and with severity on all wildcats. This is not true." (280) What I wrote in *Wartime Strikes* (25 years after I had broken with Trotskyism) was the exact opposite, that the CP subordinated itself to traditional labour leaders in order to preserve their posts and privileges and their ability to get occasional resolutions passed. The labour leaders did not need the CP to convince them to support Roosevelt, support the war, and oppose strikes.

Johnson gives the impression of a principled Addes-Sugar caucus (he exaggerates the importance of Sugar who, as a paid functionary, had no independent power base in the union) and a motley combination of elements supporting Reuther. The reality is that neither major caucus in the UAW was either principled or monolithic. Reuther's caucus included militant socialists, rabid Catholic anti-Communists, and traditional business unionists. The Addes-Thomas-CP caucus had an equally diverse range of supporters. The Buick Local 599 in Flint, for example, was an Addes local and was militantly opposed to the no-strike pledge and was also anti-Communist. That was why the Addes caucus, which had a clear majority at the 1944 Convention, could not get its resolution reaffirming the no-strike pledge passed.

Johnson also misunderstands the nature of democracy in the pre-Reuther UAW. Sugar is predictably at the very centre of what Johnson sees as the union's democratic process. "As general counsel, Sugar was also the keeper of the union's constitution and hence the main day-to-day defender of rank-and-file interests," notes Johnson. (13) Or, "The constitution was a fine instrument, but the spirit in which it was administered became the key to union democracy in the UAW. And the men who made democracy tick within the union were above all, George Addes and Maurice Sugar." (258) And again, "Sugar and Addes were the keepers of the seal, the chief protectors of democratic principle in the UAW." (259) In the biography of a lawyer, I suppose, it is understandable to exaggerate the significance of written rules and laws. But these claims are simply contrary to reality. The UAW Constitution was one of the more democratic union constitutions in the early days, but the democracy was definitely limited. It gave huge power to the national administration and its control over the union staff. It took the final decision of strike authorization away from the locals and gave it to the International Executive Board. It was this constitution which made it possible for the UAW leadership to break the strike at North American Aviation in 1941 that Johnson quite properly exposes, and it was this constitution which made it possible for Reuther to very quickly consolidate his authority and create a one-party administration when he gained power in the UAW.

Democracy in the UAW owed its existence essentially to the competition between two powerful caucuses that were forced to go to the membership in yearly elections, a membership that was militant and undisciplined. Johnson actually accepts the possibility that the result may have been the same if the other caucus had gained total domination of the union. The leadership tried to limit democracy

from the start, using the power of the national treasury to help control elections, and putting administrators over locals which dared to support wildcat strikes. In any case, the idea that democracy in the UAW depended on the elected Secretary-Treasurer and the hired general counsel cannot be accepted.

Maurice Sugar was a lawyer, and a very good one. He was able to use whatever the law allowed to defend workers' rights, minority rights, and civil liberties. That he wasn't always successful was surely not his fault in a legal system designed to keep workers and minorities in their place. Johnson, however, puts a theoretical construction on Sugar's legal views that is hard to justify, even though it may have been Sugar's own. "It was 'procedure' and 'technicalities' that made it possible for Sugar to integrate his work as a lawyer under the U.S. constitutional system with his belief in the revolutionary transformation of U.S. society. Can one be a constitutionalist and a revolutionist at the same time? Sugar's answer was an emphatic yes. Indeed, without the Constitution, there would be no revolution. The rest was ultraleftist, 'infantile' playacting." (102) That is a strangely contradictory viewpoint. The US Constitution protects certain individual rights (depending on the makeup of the Supreme Court). But it is rooted in the defense of private property or, more precisely, corporate private property. It seems to me that it is enough to say that there are enough contradictions, loopholes, and technicalities in constitutional law to make it useful to radicals and labour lawyers, in the limited sense that some legal victories are possible. But to enshrine the Constitution the way Sugar and Johnson do seems to indicate acceptance of "revolutionary transformation" that is indistinguishable from moderate New Deal type reform. Johnson wants to have his sugarcake and eat it, too. He wants to show Sugar as a revolutionary radical. But he also wants to show him in the mainstream of American politics and a supporter of a Constitution that originally legalized slavery, and enshrined the rights of property. "Sugar thus presented a cogent perspective. He did not give an inch on his Marxist principles, yet simultaneously remained firmly in the Anglo-American legal tradition." (218) That's a neat trick — but I don't think even a lawyer of Sugar's competence could pull it off.

All of this points to a problem for the historian: the paucity of material on the life of Party branches in the CP. Johnson cannot deal with it because Sugar was not a member. But Stanley Nowak could have, because he was a member. But his biographer, his wife, avoids the question like the plague. Nowhere does she say that they were, or were not, members. That is unfortunate, because Nowak, as a person who remained loyal to the Party, could have provided important evidence of what membership in the Party involved. The same thing is true of his role as a Democratic state senator in the Michigan legislature. How did the Democratic Caucus function? What was the role of the UAW and the CIO in Democratic Party politics? How did the unions use their considerable influence in the Democratic Party? What deals were cut? And so on. Generally speaking, a historian cannot be faulted for what he does not deal with. But it is different with a biographer. And when the book is essentially autobiography, the charge of omission is a serious one;

the Nowak book is much inferior to the Sugar volume as a consequence.

The biographies of Sugar and Nowak nevertheless have something in common. Margaret Collingwood Nowak wants to show her husband as in the mainstream of New Deal politics. She depicts him working with other Democrats in the state legislature, working with traditional, old line labour leaders. But she also shows him firmly within the Party's fold. For example, the Nowaks were shaken by the Stalin-Hitler Pact, but managed to rationalize it as necessary for the defense of the Soviet Union. After the war, Nowak visited Poland and spoke before the Polish parliament. That he became a supporter (remained is more accurate) of the Stalinist Polish government is not surprising. In Nowak's book the exiled Polish government in London is called reactionary, which it was, and the Warsaw government is regarded as democratic, which it was not. The book ends with a defense of the official Polish government position on Solidarity. Unfortunately for the Nowaks, book publishing takes too long and changes in the party line are often too quick. So they were left behind by recent developments, in which recognition of Solidarity as a legal organization has been followed by Solidarity's ascent to power.

This attempt to present Nowak as a mainstream New Deal Democrat and a defender of the Communist Party does have a limited validity. It demonstrates that the CP has not been a revolutionary organization, and not very left — at least since the Seventh (and last) Congress of the Comintern in 1934. The problem with Nowak's book and what limits its usefulness considerably are its major omissions, as indicated above, and its inaccuracies. Most of these stem from a heavy dependence on *Głos ludowy*, the Detroit Polish Communist weekly, as a source. The author, for example, claims that all blacks who stayed in the plant at the time of the 1941 Ford strike were employed by the Ford Service Department as strikebreakers, a claim which has no justification.

Nowak was active in the labour movement and in the Polish community in Michigan as an organizer, journalist, and broadcaster. He was also active in Democratic politics. It is a pity that the book does not present a more significant slice of what he was and did. It would not have mattered that the book, even more than the one on Sugar, was uncritical. It could have been useful and interesting. Unfortunately, it is not very much of either. The biography of Sugar, despite its weaknesses, is an important book that fills a major gap in the history of the labour movement. We need more books that address this history of the left in local contexts, books that enrich and reach past the many controversies of communism and its relationship to the labour movement.