

Which Side Are They On? Thinking About The Labour Bureaucracy

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Which Side Are They On? Thinking About The Labour Bureaucracy

Mark Leier

William Sloane, *Hoffa* (Cambridge: MIT Press 1991).

Steven Fraser, *Labor Shall Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of Labor* (New York: Free Press 1991).

WILLIAM SLOANE and Steven Fraser have crafted thorough and insightful biographies of labour leaders. They present critical, balanced, and on the whole positive interpretations of their subjects. But how should we assess and judge labour leaders? On the face of it, it would seem unfair to compare Jimmy Hoffa of the Teamsters with Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (ACW). Hoffa's politics were voluntarist at best, conservative Republican at worst, and his vision for the trade union movement was even simpler than Samuel Gompers' call for "more." Convicted of perjury and attempt to influence jurors, Hoffa was linked to gangsters such as Sam Giancano and Richard Nixon, and he shared their managerial style. The Teamsters were corrupt and undemocratic before Hoffa became president, but he further centralized union structure so that its executive, including himself, was largely elected by delegates whom the executive members themselves appointed. Often he personally decided what locals would bargain and settle for, overriding the rank and file's agenda to suit his own purposes. Little surprise that even before his mysterious disappearance in 1975 Jimmy Hoffa was a symbol for all that was wrong with the labour movement.

In contrast, Hillman stood for progressive social unionism. He and his union pressed for minimum wage laws, legislated reductions in the work day, and a host of progressive reforms that would benefit the working class, not just his own membership. A socialist in his early career, he remained convinced that labour had to be involved in political action. Its best chance, he believed, was to work within

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the Democratic party, and Hillman himself came to have the ear of Franklin Roosevelt. It is easy to conclude that Hillman was a "good" labour leader, concerned with social issues and reform, while Hoffa was a "bad" one, concerned only with expanding his own power. Of the two, Hillman remains, in the popular imagination, a labour statesman, while Hoffa's name is virtually a synonym for corruption and criminality.

Yet one begins a book on Hoffa disliking the man and ends up with some grudging admiration. Sloane explains how the unschooled, earthy, and volatile Hoffa could become an effective and popular leader, for the very traits that made him disliked by outsiders were often appreciated by his constituency. His outspoken, crude populism was calculated to strike responsive chords among the membership even as it alienated and frightened employers and the government. He used an undeniable charisma to his advantage and secured a genuine affection from many of his members. Indeed, when the Teamster executive, headed by the lardy and larcenous Jackie Presser, tried to rescind Hoffa's status as "General President Emeritus for Life" at the 1986 Teamsters convention, the delegates overwhelmingly defeated the motion.

By the same token, one starts out with a respect for Hillman that diminishes as the book goes on. Fraser depicts him as withdrawn, ascetic, and intellectually sophisticated. No glittering Las Vegas conventions for the cold and unpopular Hillman, but no personal affection or sympathy from the rank and file, either. If Hoffa prospered personally at the expense of the union membership, his wealth was seen by many unionists as a suitable reward for his efforts on their behalf, while his flamboyance and liberal spending demonstrated that he, and by extension his union, had made it. Hillman had no taste for conspicuous consumption. Instead he quietly and unobtrusively collected a salary several times greater than that of his average union member. His dry, measured message of limited reform was largely ignored by the powerful and failed to inspire the membership.

If the two differed considerably in their approaches, they still shared a great deal. In a detailed and closely written book, Fraser traces Hillman's experience as an immigrant worker, his climb to the top of the labour bureaucracy, and his influence in the White House in the late 1930s and 1940s. But despite his social unionism, Hillman remained, like Hoffa, a practitioner of the art of the possible. Both learned much from the left and used socialists to build their unions. Hillman flirted with the radical socialists of the 1910s and 1920s, while Hoffa credited the Trotskyist Farrell Dobbs with teaching him much about organizing and trade unionism. Once secured in power, however, both were quick to isolate and purge the very left that had helped them rise in the union. Both took over unions that were riddled with mobsters, and both sought compromise and accommodation with them, though Hillman was better able to distance himself from the dirty work. Nor was Hillman an advocate of union democracy. Instead, he used the machinery of the ACW to further his career and to raise his profile as a so-called responsible

labour leader. "Responsible" in the 1930s and 1940s meant anti-Communist and quiescent, and Hillman, along with Walter Reuther and Philip Murray, helped shape the Congress of Industrial Organization into a conservative, reformist organization that stifled rank and file action. His defence for these actions was always that trade unionists had to be pragmatic and could not afford wild-eyed idealism. There is always some truth to this claim, especially when labour is under attack. But it is also the standard defence of the labour bureaucrat that can be used to justify any action, no matter how reactionary.

It is the same defence that William Sloane takes up in his lively and revisionist biography of Jimmy Hoffa. In a sympathetic account, Sloane goes behind the headlines, the scandals, and the mythology to argue that whatever his faults, Hoffa must be considered an important, successful, and dogged trade unionist whose overall contribution to the labour movement was positive. Ironically, if we adopt pragmatism as the sole standard by which to judge union leaders, Hoffa comes off as the better trade unionist. Unlike Hillman, Hoffa consistently delivered to his members. He tripled the wages of his members in a few short years, evened out the huge regional wage discrepancies, created a pension plan, and made the Teamsters a union that employers feared and respected. Hillman, in contrast, was unable to raise wages in the garment industry significantly, was rarely as feared or respected by employers, and won little personal loyalty from the membership.

Furthermore, if we can judge either man by his enemies, Hoffa again seems the better tactician. Hillman saw the liberal state as his ally and was quick to make the concessions necessary to work within the system. Eager to be labour's man in the White House, in fact he is better seen as Roosevelt's man in the labour movement. The compromises needed to gain access to the state machinery ultimately meant that Hillman was a defender of the status quo rather than a threat to it. Hoffa's appraisal of the state as labour's foe was undoubtedly more accurate and led him to steer a more independent and aggressive course. The head of a union that had the potential to shut down the nation, Hoffa preferred to reward his friends and punish his enemies and thus was never a trusted ally of the government. Where Hillman was welcomed into the corridors of power, albeit as a second-class citizen, Hoffa was constantly investigated, wire-tapped, and harassed by the state. In the end, anyone the Kennedys hated that much cannot be all bad, while anyone Roosevelt liked that much cannot be all good.

Sloane goes further in his defence of Hoffa. He points out, rightly enough, that Hoffa's connections to the mob have been greatly exaggerated and distorted. In a neat riposte, Sloane reminds us that gangsterism is part and parcel of capitalism and that many employers, including the Kennedy family, have been linked to organized crime. Furthermore, without the connivance of the state, organized crime would be very simple to eradicate. In some instances, Hoffa was even able to use the mob to help the Teamsters win their demands. Nor is it easy to calculate the damage done to the union by its underworld ties. James Fox, a labour lawyer active

in the recent clean-up of the Teamsters, has admitted that he "never came up with a good answer" to the question "How is the average Teamster being hurt" by mob connections.¹

The question shows the difficulty with the pragmatism defence. Once taken up, it becomes nearly impossible to draw the line, to point to the instance where the "practical" leader has gone too far or has made one too many deals with the devil. Worse for Hillman, it is possible to argue that he was a less successful union leader than Hoffa because he was less pragmatic, less willing to do whatever it took to secure better conditions for his workers. But surely a line must be drawn. One answer to Fox's question might be that a good number of "average Teamsters" were beaten up by goons for trying to run against Hoffa and his lieutenants. This takes us to the essential issue of labour leadership, the question of bureaucracy. One thing Hillman and Hoffa shared was a distrust of the rank and file. Neither was much of a democrat, and both sought always to channel power upwards, off the shop floor to the local, to the region, ultimately to headquarters. It is their relationship to the rank and file that unites them even as they differed over the role of the state and the relative merits of medical plans and protective legislation. Both men distrusted the ability of the rank and file to decide policy matters; both used rank and file militancy for their own ends, whipping it up when necessary and crushing it when it was inconvenient; both refused to listen to alternative ideas and directions for the labour movement when these went against their own sense of self-preservation.

Therein lies the beauty of the pragmatist rationalization. It assumes what it needs to prove, namely that the path taken was the best path. But in assessing the labour leadership, we need to ask if other ends might have been pursued, if other strategies might have been more effective, or how successful these leaders were, not in getting any agreement but in getting the best possible agreement. We might also ask how their actions and results compared with the dreams and agendas of the workers they claimed to speak for. Of course, neither Hillman nor Hoffa much cared about these questions. Both assumed that they knew what was best for the labour movement. By rejecting rank and file control, they eliminated any options other than the ones they chose. As both authors make clear, these choices were often made because they would help ensure re-election or would win the approval of powerful businessmen or politicians, or would help defeat radicals in the union. No matter what the decision, in the absence of effective opposition and a powerful rank and file, it could always be defended as the best possible solution, for the manipulations of the leadership made sure it was the only solution. When alternative visions and strategies have been eliminated, it is very difficult to counter the claims of the victors.

¹Matthew Howard and Betsy Reed, "Hoffa's Unruly Legacy: Corruption, Complacency, and Democratic Reform in Unions Today," *Dollars and Sense*, 201 (September-October 1995), 33.

In this sense, then, one need not spend too much time debating who was the better union leader. Hoffa and Hillman represented different tactical approaches to the same grand strategy of collaboration and control, of adapting to the rules set up by capital and the state rather than challenging them. It could be plausibly argued that Hoffa merely followed the path Hillman blazed, pushed it a little further, and adapted it to the specific conditions he faced. The differences between them are better explained by the nature of their industries, the period in which they were active, and their personalities rather than any principled or ideological differences. Hoffa's ability to raise Teamster wages in the 1950s and 1960s reflected a particular set of conditions: post-war prosperity, the ability of employers to pass on wage increases to customers, the regulation of inter-state transport, and the increased importance of the trucking industry. No such opportunities allowed garment workers in the 1920s and 1930s to make similar gains, and this was part of the reason Hillman turned to the state to do what his union could not.

Despite their political and personal differences, Hoffa and Hillman rolled up their sleeves and went to work for very similar ends. In this way, both *Hoffa* and *Labor Shall Rule* may be read as useful descriptions of what went wrong with the US labour movement. Sloane makes a case that Jimmy Hoffa, no less than Sidney Hillman, should be regarded as a labour statesman. Fraser reminds us that the label is an honour bestowed by one's enemies for playing their game by their rules.

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