Nelson Lichtenstein, *A Contest of Ideas: Capital, Politics, and Labor* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013). 336 pp. $25.00 Softcover.

Back in the 1940s the seasoned labor journalist J. B. S. Hardman argued that unions and intellectuals needed each other, for only the combination of organization and ideology created a *social movement* that could make history. Now the seasoned historian of US labour Nelson Lichtenstein—the best practitioner in the field, in my view—brings the perspectives of intellectual history to bear in this extraordinary collection of essays that adds up to a potent analysis of the transformations of labour and capital that have rocked American life since Hardman's time.

Lichtenstein brings to *A Contest of Ideas* a keen, historical self-consciousness that illuminates both his own intellectual development and the pressing quandaries of the present moment. He came to his work originally as an anti-Stalinist, New Left partisan of class-struggle unionism, when conditions seemed to warrant that perspective and turned his attention back to what seemed like the nearest relevant period. "Between 1967 and 1973," he writes of the time when his research commenced, "the size and number of strikes reached levels not seen since the immediate post-World War II years."(16) Just before the 1940s strike wave, of course, there had been the war's no-strike pledge—and the shop-floor agitation challenging it. That became the topic of his first book, *Labor's War at Home* (1982), which helped spark a spate of history-writing regarding the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Much of Lichtenstein's most influential work, like *Labor's War* and his masterly biography, *Walter Reuther: The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* (1995), illuminates the treacherous terrain of labour struggle and the course of US politics through the 1940s, and *Contest* brings together his consummate essays in this field: "'The Man in the Middle': A Social History of Automobile Industry Foremen"; "From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclipse of Social Democracy in the Postwar Era"; and (with Robert Korstad) "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals and the Early Civil Rights Movement." It was also in that period that Lichtenstein found exemplars of labour intellectuals, most of them associated with the anti-Stalinist left, who are the subject of biographical sketches in this collection: Harvey Swados, B. J. Widick, Herbert Hill, and C. Wright Mills

Lichtenstein illuminates the 1940s as a watershed—not unlike the emergence and unraveling of Reconstruction after the Civil War—that bore enormous social, political, and cultural consequences for the trajectory of US history afterward. In his view, the union movement centered on the CIO approximated a social-democratic force in US politics—a dramatic breakthrough that was quickly put on the defensive as early as 1938, at the same moment that the modern American Right with its anti-union, anti-New Deal animus gelled. Lichtenstein's

analysis of everything that followed rests on a fine sensitivity to ambiguity and tragedy. World War II both suppressed labour energies *and* consolidated the germ of a collective-bargaining regime that implanted unionism in the major mass production industries, within a stolid bureaucratic order that nonetheless provided a number of egalitarian breakthroughs—not least for African American workers. Notwithstanding the limits of the war-borne bureaucratic order, the postwar strike wave still fostered an expansive vision in which labour power might be leveraged politically to shape a new kind of social economy that gave workers a voice in business planning and a wide set of public welfare benefits. Yet the business counter-offensive, interknit with both the Red Scare and the reaction of the Southern segregationists, killed off those aspirations by 1948 along with the prospects for a labour-based program promoting racial equality nationally. The weaknesses of the left itself—for which the Stalinist ideology of Communist organizers and the anti-Communist vengeance of their labour-liberal opponents bear equal blame—also contributed to the default, as labor settled in to the regulated order of "industrial relations" and privately-bargained fringe benefits that was inextricable from the race and gender-stratified labour market limiting unionism's sway and public appeal.

Ideas count—in matters of legitimacy, moral values, political visions, legal argument, and scholarly conventions—throughout the book, and Lichtenstein frankly recounts his own changes in thought. In one essay, built around a review of Risa Goluboff's *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights*, he reconsiders the argument of "Opportunities Found and Lost": the notion of a labour-based civil rights movement was not only a matter of black workers in CIO unions but also of a jurisprudence (alternative to the NAACP's legal assault on *Plessy*) that sought to enlarge labour rights based on the Thirteenth Amendment's prohibition of involuntary servitude. Moreover, he ably demonstrates that an "intellectual" turn implies no "elitism" on the part of a labour historian, for the assumption that popular protest is "spontaneous" condescendingly "eviscerates the sentiment, planning, ideas, and leaders that are always present when collective action becomes visible to outsiders who are not privy to the inner world of those whose discontent is finally made manifest."(2)

Contest is premised too on Lichtenstein's recognition that his own initial class-struggle perspective has been sidelined by the calamitous decline of union power since the 1970s. Thus he has turned his attention to analyzing the structural transformations of American capitalism over the past four decades, most notably in his book on Wal-Mart, *The Retail Revolution* (2009), and in the stellar essays collected here on the shift of corporate structure away from midcentury norms, the peculiarities of "supply-chain" capitalism, and the latest threats to public-sector unionism. He notes, incisively, that both liberals and leftists—who assumed, whether favourably or antagonistically, the stability and permanence of the bureaucratic order of vertically integrated corporations and industrial rela-

tions—were "subject to ideological ambush" (155) from the laissez faire Right when economic change ushered in new practices of "flexible accumulation."

Lichtenstein supposes that the rise of marketing and distribution giants like Wal-Mart signals a return to characteristics of pre-industrial "merchant capitalism" (35), so that the signal reform crusade of that age—the rise of anti-slavery as an international campaign—is echoed by today's "human rights" NGOs, which currently appear better able than traditional unionism to assail labor abuses of global production. Those historical analogies are not entirely instructive, since contrary to early-modern merchant capitalism, as Lichtenstein himself notes, "the fact is that in the twenty-first century more people on this planet work in factories than at any other moment in world history."(183) Yet he has a point in suggesting that amid the institutional shift away from large-scale corporate planning to the market transactions of dispersed purchase agents, suppliers, shippers, and logistical services, the ostensibly universalistic norms of "human rights" seem to have trumped the solidaristic basis of union struggle as a means of redressing injustice. Lichtenstein is legitimately skeptical that human-rights campaigns to elicit "corporate responsibility" can resist the steady reduction of labour standards and the accompanying rise of inequality.

His concerns about the regnant "rights-talk" of our time and its individualistic bias occasionally seems to echo another familiar complaint that racial and other forms of "identity politics" have eclipsed the priority of "class"; but for the most part, he does not dwell there. He knows that rights talk itself can have multiple flavors, as in the disposition of "free labour" ideology under the Thirteenth Amendment to champion the cause of super-exploited black workers and build a labour-based civil rights movement. He is assuredly correct that the aim of a left must be to complement liberalizing trends of expanded "rights" with the democratizing impulse of equality best represented by the collective action and solidarity of the labour tradition, for otherwise, even liberal rights are in the long run insecure. As we contemplate the prospects for rejoining those two currents, the intellectual focus in this volume poses this decisive question: amid the "constant revolutionizing" and self-transformation of the capitalist mode of production, can the ideas of the left again gel in a form adequate to some future moment of flux—and thus regain the upper hand, as the right did in the 1970s and 1980s?

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