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edited by alexander cockburn and jeffrey st.clair

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May 13, 2008

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[The Crisis at Home](#)

May 12, 2008

St. Clair / Frank
[The Pentagon's Toxic Legacy](#)

Ziga Vodovnik
[Rebels Against Tyranny: an Interview with Howard Zinn on Anarchism](#)

Gary Leupp
[Why All of Our Efforts Won't Stop an Attack on Iran](#)

Franklin Lamb
[Choufeit's Bloody Pentacost](#)

Suzanne Baroud
[The Ambition of Hillary Clinton](#)

Martha Rosenberg
[Farmer Ernie's Chamber of Horrors](#)

Dave Zirin
[The Boss's Boycott](#)

Carl Finamore
[I Ain't Gonna Work No More](#)

May 13, 2008

Are Labor Unions Too Powerful

The Myth That Won't Die

By DAVID MACARAY

"The greatest anti-poverty program ever invented was the labor union."

--George Meany

Even on the face of it, the notion that American labor unions are "too powerful" is silly. In fact, it's more than silly; it's pathetic, really. Pathetic because there are people out there who still embrace this notion, still cling to it the way they cling to Kennedy assassination theories and the belief that something selling for \$19.99 is cheaper than something selling for \$20, cling to it despite staggering evidence to the contrary.

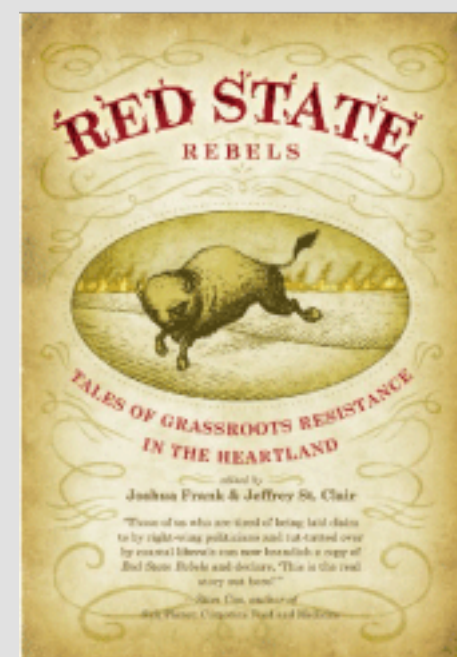
For openers, consider: There are millions of union members who don't even have the right to strike, who don't have the bedrock union right of withholding their labor as a "last resort" means of protesting an unacceptable contract. Who are these union members? Federal, state, county and municipal workers. They're forbidden to strike. It's illegal. How's that for union "power"?

Former Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis famously said, "Under no conditions must labor give up its right to strike." Brandeis realized that without the right to withhold their labor, union members are more or less defenseless, stripped naked.

With strikes being *illegal* a union can't even "fake" one as

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with strike being *illegal* a union can't even "take" one as leverage; it can't even engage in the time-honored practice of saber-rattling as a means of getting management to sweeten its offer. Depriving a union of the right to strike is like telling a family they're allowed to defend their home against marauding intruders but aren't allowed to use force.

Or consider this: The U.S. has no laws against management hiring permanent replacement workers. How about that as evidence organized labor is running roughshod over the economy? A big, bad union member goes on strike, and when he returns to work, he finds that he no longer has a job. Given Brandeis's view of the sanctity of strikes, we can only imagine what he would think of the predicament where striking is tantamount to "quitting" one's job.

Or how about all those right-to-work states that allow employees to hire into a union shop but aren't required to join the union? That's a particularly hard one to swallow: a labor union so "powerful" that it doesn't even have the muscle to insist that co-workers belong to the organization that represents them.

There are people who, for philosophical reasons, don't support trade unionism, who don't believe in the principle of collectivism, who think a person should be able to make it "on their own," who don't rejoice in being part of something larger than themselves, and who don't understand or acknowledge the strength-in-numbers argument. If that's how they see the world, fine; let them go out and be entrepreneurs or mortgage lenders or whatever those people become.

But these same people shouldn't be allowed to hire into a facility that offers the highest wages, richest benefits and most attractive working conditions in the blue-collar community, and pretend that it's perfectly ethical *not* to join the very union that's providing these goodies.

Moreover, they shouldn't pretend to be superior or immune to a status which they claim to oppose philosophically, but from which they benefit materially. We have words for people like that, the least offensive of which is "hypocrite."

And yet, states are permitted to have "right-to-work" laws on the books—laws that allow employees to reap the benefits of a union contract while not being required to join up. There are 22 such states in the U.S., mostly in the Deep South and Sun Belt.

Then there's that other screwball myth about unions—namely, that unions are so "powerful," it's practically impossible for a union member to get fired. That characterization is not only inaccurate, it's an outright lie, one that's been propagated by managers too lazy or dimwitted to figure out what to do with a bad employee. The union makes a convenient scapegoat.

Let's be clear. No union contract has ever included language that prohibits management from firing a deadbeat worker. None. Period. No union negotiator would be arrogant or foolish enough to submit such a clause, and no manager would be gullible enough to sign a contract that included one.

In truth, all one has to do is check out a typical non-union establishment and observe the number of "substandard" employees working there to realize that most bosses don't bother getting rid of inferior workers. Firing someone is a hassle. It's far easier having the good workers "carry" the bad ones. And, of course, in a union shop, they have the additional advantage of pretending it's the "powerful" union who's preventing them from taking action.

Finally, let's consider organized labor's traditional political ally, its

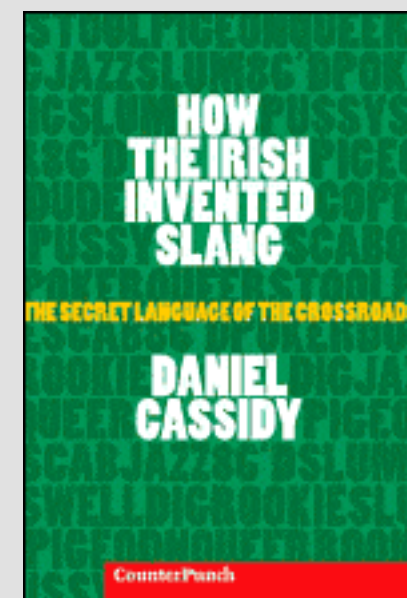


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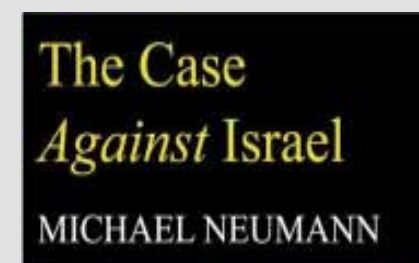
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comrade in arms, its "sponsor," so to speak. We're referring to the Democratic Party. And the Democrats can be looked at in one of two ways.

They can be regarded as labor's friends and benefactors, who, while far from "ideal," were the party that launched the New Deal, passed the National Labor Relations Act (commonly known as the Wagner Act), and came to be recognized, grudgingly, in our two-party system as the lesser of two evils (the other "evil" being the Republicans).

Or we can take a more jaundiced view and regard them as a vile bunch of opportunists and cowards who, while willing to bury their snouts in the trough of political contributions, run for cover whenever they're asked to take a defiantly pro-labor stand. (Exhibit A: failing to repeal the Taft-Hartley Act)

This relationship between unions and the Democrats is another ludicrous example of labor's so-called "power." Organized labor gives them millions of dollars in donations (over many decades, how much has it been . . . \$500 million?), and what do the Democrats give labor in return? Lip-service and cautionary advice to "be patient."

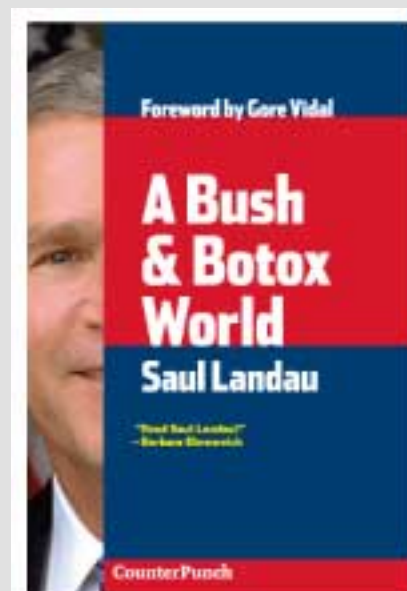
Call unions what you like. Call them predictable, stubborn, unimaginative, clumsy, etc. Call them dumb, if you like. But for crying out loud, let's not embarrass ourselves by calling them "too powerful."

David Macaray, a Los Angeles playwright and writer, was a former labor union rep. He can be reached at dmacaray@earthlink.net



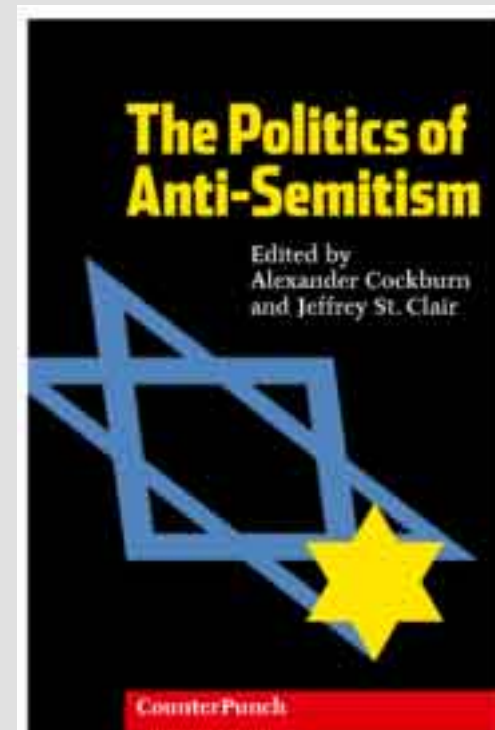
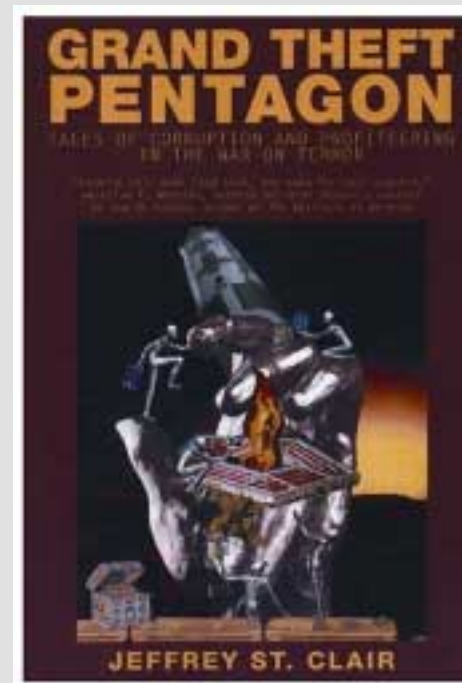
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