

REVIEWS

Reviews:**Trade Unionism: Purposes and Forms**

by *Ross M. Martin*, 1989 (Oxford, Oxford University Press)
\$70.00, hardback, pp. xiii + 296.

In 1928 Selig Perlman published *A Theory of the Labor Movement* which trenchantly criticised V.I. Lenin's (1902) *What is to be Done?* Lenin had attacked unions and their leaders for their "spontaneity" or "economism" in pursuing improvements in wages and working conditions, and how this distracted unions from their true avocation of revolutionary consciousness and the establishment of Marx's dictatorship of the proletariat. According to Lenin, unions would only achieve their allotted appointment with destiny if "homegrown" leaders were replaced by "intellectuals", or outsiders (from the economic struggle) trained in Social Democratic revolutionary theory. Perlman vehemently criticised Lenin and his intellectuals (and others who professed to know what was best for unions) as being overcome by "social mysticism" and diverting unions away from the "organic" needs of rank and file unionists. He then went on to develop a model of "business unionism" where the purpose(s) of unions is defined by the needs and desires of members.

Ross Martin's excellent *Trade Unionism: Purposes and Forms* is an exhaustive excursion into both the theoretical and empirical dimensions of this classic debate between Perlman and Lenin. In Part One of the book Martin examines five major theoretical frames of reference—pluralist, syndicalist, Marxist-Leninist, organicist and authoritarian—and numerous variants within each. He presents the major features of the respective frames without providing any evaluation, as he is "concerned with them simply as *ideas*", leaving it to the reader to evaluate them "in the light of their own ideological preferences" (p.3). A more extensive account of Lenin's views on unions under socialism is provided, however, because "of a hunch that this account will evoke hotter opposition than any other interpretation" (p.4).

This examination not surprisingly reveals that unions have been perceived to have a wide range of purposes. Theorists have maintained that unions represent the interests of members, the working class, society or the nation, and the state or party. Their major goals have been interpreted to defend and improve the rights and interests of members, raise workers' consciousness, promote members' moral well-being, and enhance production. Martin wryly observes that "the issue of trade union purpose has exercised the minds of outsiders on a scale and to a degree that marks the trade union out among modern non-governmental associations" (p.99).

In Part Two Martin identifies the various forms in which unions have manifested themselves in 27 different countries. In doing this he focuses on the

activities of union *confederations* in each of the respective countries. He is not interested in the diversity that exists within a union movement and summarily dismisses Hoxie's eclectic classificatory scheme as being "over-elaborate and indecisive" (p.107). He develops a typology of different experiences of union confederations based on their autonomy of either the party or the state. The material presented on the 27 countries is descriptive and empirical, and it is likely that readers unfamiliar with such a breadth of union confederation experience will find this material hard-going. The presentation may have been improved by bringing forward the conceptual or theoretical ideas developed in the penultimate chapter of Part Two (readers might be well advised to do this themselves).

Martin links the form of unionism to the pivotal rôle played by parties in the political process. Following Sartori's *Parties and Party Systems* (1976) Martin distinguishes between non-competitive and competitive party systems. Non-competitive systems result in unions which are dominated by the needs of the state; while competitive systems provide greater scope for autonomy and diversity, with the qualification of some unions being the creatures of the party. In competitive systems unions will be generally less "political" than unions in non-competitive systems, and will be predominantly concerned with pursuing economic goals. Or to return to the Perlman/Lenin debate "Their joint conclusion . . . was that trade unions *left to themselves* will stress, above all else, goals which match the limited horizons of the bulk of their members" (p.239).

This is a scholarly and thought provoking work which should be read by all of those with an interest in unions. Notwithstanding its overall high quality two minor criticisms will be offered. First, it is not clear whether Martin is concerned with *unionism* or *trade unionism*. The unions, or rather confederations, he has examined are not all organised on a craft or trade basis. Second, his analysis of unions is conducted at a fairly general or abstract level—at the level of the relationship between confederations and the party or state. Martin hypothesises that there is a "tendency for a radical change in political regime to be followed by an equally radical change in the character of the trade union movement" (p.223). While such a proposition would seem to fit neatly with the changes which are taking place in Eastern Europe it is unable to explain the problems of unions in competitive party or capitalist systems that are seemingly wilting under the twin pressures of technological change and increased employer opposition. In seeking to arrive at a more specific understanding of unions in such countries more attention would need to be devoted to analysing the nature of the relationship that exists between unions and employers.

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