

preliminary conclusions. It is an introduction to rather than a comprehensive survey of its subject.

WILLIAM C. RINGENBERG is a professor of history at Taylor University, Upland, Indiana. His research interests are in American religious history.

*State of the Union: A Century of American Labor.* By Nelson Lichtenstein. (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2002. Pp. xi, 336. Illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95.)

Far from being a dusty chronicle of unions' ups and downs, this provocative and intelligent book glistens on almost every page with fresh perspectives on the relationships between organized labor, politics, ideological battles, economic change, and changes in labor law. The author of books on the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) during World War II and United Auto Workers leader Walter Reuther, Nelson Lichtenstein argues convincingly that labor unions have led efforts for workplace democracy, full citizenship, and the idea of a "living wage" that would allow working-class families to have satisfying lives. Troubled by the recent decline of unions and the erosion of workers' real income and benefits, Lichtenstein passionately believes that unions must reclaim their role as leaders for democracy in workplaces and in society.

Lichtenstein argues that these issues were more central to American life in the Progressive era when reformers and workers jostled with giant corporations for more power and better lives for working people. "The labor question" (as Progressives called it) became more central in the 1930s as New Dealers promoted union growth to stimulate purchasing power and attack workplace inequities. The Wagner Act and the CIO unions helped to bring democracy to shop floors, raised standards of living, and opened a doorway "onto the democratic promise of American life" (p. 30). These gains were solidified in the two decades after World War II, when real wages doubled and unions brought a semblance of democratic citizenship to new immigrants and African Americans, even though discrimination persisted in unions and workplaces throughout the nation.

Lichtenstein persuasively argues that, contrary to common perceptions, there was no truce, or "postwar accord," between unions and employers in these heyday union years. Northern business used the Taft-Hartley Act to subvert New Deal labor law and stifle dissent, while southern white oligarchs quashed efforts to recast race and labor relations there. In retreat, unions abandoned their efforts for both industrial democracy and a national welfare state, which Lichtenstein believes "proved a strategic error of the first order, whose legacy plagues us yet" (p. 126), and failed to win substantial labor law reform. Laws that have attacked employment barriers because of race, gender, age, and disability are important, but Lichtenstein believes these "rights conscious" victories have eclipsed the collective employee

provisions embodied by the Wagner Act. More recently, union and worker strength eroded further through concessionary bargaining, assaults on unions, new technology and managerial practices that increased employer power, neo-liberal deregulation policies—and ineffective union leadership.

Lichtenstein's analysis is not all gloomy. He finds hope in AFL-CIO president John Sweeney's efforts to organize new workers in service industries and to become more independent politically, and especially in union efforts to ally with neighborhood groups and other citizen activists around "living wage" campaigns and other working-class community issues. But his prescription for union revival seems clearly patterned after the old CIO model of the 1930s: militancy, democratic union governance, and political action.

Critics who find such views outmoded and naive will have trouble refuting the sound scholarship and logic on which they are based and that run throughout this timely and important book. And while the book does not mention Indiana, it indirectly sheds much light on Hoosier history and should stimulate much interest among scholars, workers, union officials, and the general public—in Indiana and elsewhere.

MICHAEL A. GORDON is professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

*Merging Lines: American Railroads, 1900–1970.* By Richard Saunders, Jr. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001. Pp. xix, 486. Maps, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$49.95.)

The history of American railroads during the first seven decades of the twentieth century can be summarized as a struggle for survival in the face of changing markets, system over-capacity, oppressive governmental regulation, and the rise of external competition. Railroad managers sometimes were inept, and the politicians who dictated the framework in which these companies functioned usually performed no better.

In *Merging Lines*, Richard Saunders, Jr., concentrates on the primary strategy employed during that era by railroad leaders and federal officials in their ongoing attempts to set matters right. Mergers had been commonplace before 1900, but courts, regulators, and Congress then decided that further combinations were contrary to the public interest. By 1920 federal policy had reversed course and now endorsed mergers—but only symbolically—and rail executives thwarted specific federal proposals that they deemed objectionable. As the industry's economic fortunes worsened after World War II, interest in mergers revived and major combinations were cobbled together. Some merged entities thrived. Others, especially Penn Central, proved to be embarrassing failures.