



Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

1 | 2003

State of the Union

Howell John HARRIS. *Bloodless Victories : The Rise and Fall of the Open Shop in the Philadelphia Metal Trades, 1890-1940.*

New York : Cambridge University Press, 2000. 456 pp.

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Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/618>

DOI : 10.4000/transatlantica.618

ISSN : 1765-2766

Éditeur

AFEA

Référence électronique

Joseph A. McCartin, « Howell John HARRIS. *Bloodless Victories : The Rise and Fall of the Open Shop in the Philadelphia Metal Trades, 1890-1940.* », *Transatlantica* [En ligne], 1 | 2003, mis en ligne le 27 mars 2006, consulté le 29 avril 2021. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/618> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.618>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 29 avril 2021.



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Howell John HARRIS. *Bloodless Victories : The Rise and Fall of the Open Shop in the Philadelphia Metal Trades, 1890-1940.*

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- 1 Howell John Harris's magisterial history of labor relations in the Philadelphia metal trades has provoked surprisingly little discussion thus far in the United States. Three years after its publication, the book had garnered only a smattering of reviews by labor historians. Indeed, the U.S. journal of record, *Labor History*, had yet to review the book. Nor had this long-awaited volume by a well-known and passionate participant in U.S. labor historians' debates drawn the attention of scholarly symposia or sustained internet discussion.
- 2 This neglect, although undeserved, is in some ways understandable. *Bloodless Victories* does not fit easily into the mold of "labor history"—at least as most labor history is currently being written in the United States. This book is part business history, part labor history, part history of industrial relations. As a result it conforms to few of the characteristics most commonly found in recent labor histories, and is therefore ill-suited to prevailing scholarly tastes. Rather than making workers its primary actors, this book views history mainly through the eyes of employers as they struggle to control their labor markets and keep their shops non-union. Rather than chronicling a dramatic workers' insurgency, it carefully examines subtle economic, political, and labor market developments that influenced the decisions of mid-sized metal trades employers to either fight or compromise with unions. Rather than probing the ways in which gender, race, or ethnicity complicate workers' identities, it practically eschews such subjects for an examination of how competing employers found ways of transcending their individualistic tendencies to make common cause.

- 3 Ironically, the very features which have helped to keep *Bloodless Victories* below the radar of most U.S. labor history scholars also serve to make this book one of the most useful and authoritative accounts of early twentieth-century American labor history to have appeared within the last decade. To be sure, Harris's book sidesteps the debates about race and gender that are currently central to the field of labor history (a justifiable decision given the racial and gender makeup of his subjects). But *Bloodless Victories* wades confidently into another set of debates that go to the very heart of any effort to evaluate organized labor's record of achievements and failures in twentieth-century America. As a result, this is a book that demands attention.
- 4 Harris's choice of the Philadelphia metal trades industry as the locus of his study is apt, for in many ways the "City of Brotherly Love" provides a perfect setting in which to examine the development of U.S. labor relations. Philadelphia's metal trades shops produced a diversity of labor relations visions in the twentieth century. Frederick Winslow Taylor's scientific management theories were a product of Philadelphia's metal working shops. The ideas of such labor relations innovators as Morris L. Cooke, Robert G. Valentine, and Clinton Golden were honed by their experiences with the Philadelphia metal trades. And the United Electrical Workers, the militant CIO union that transformed the metal trades industry in the 1930s, enjoyed its greatest strength in Philadelphia. In addition to incubating contending labor relations visions, the Philadelphia metal trades also left an unusually rich historical record. The MMA's archives reveal a great deal about the collective behavior of the city's metal manufacturing entrepreneurs. Additionally, the fact that many of those men came from the same densely intertwined Quaker middle-class makes it possible to see how their shared moral sensibilities and social ties reinforced their cooperative approach to the labor question. Harris makes the most of Philadelphia's unique attributes and records to construct a compelling narrative that sheds light on some little understood areas of U.S. labor history.
- 5 One of the neglected areas limned in this volume concerns the manner of men and the types of businesses that formed the passionate cutting edge of the open shop movement. The hard-driving proprietary capitalists that led the middle-sized Philadelphia metal manufacturing companies often began as skilled mechanics themselves. They were, as Harris points out, "dedicated to the gospel of work—as a moral imperative and the road to self-realization" (60). They recruited most of their front-line supervisors from within the firm, and they prized loyalty among their workers. They were capable of competing aggressively against each other. But they were also drawn together by common problems, ranging from the erratic swings in demand for their products to the sudden upsurge of union organization among their skilled workers that erupted between 1897 and 1903. Metal manufacturers briefly flirted with the idea of compromise with organized labor during this period, but they chafed under the Philadelphia Agreement that governed relations between labor and management in the city from 1901 to 1903. The founding of the MMA in 1903 was an outgrowth of the employers' decision to abandon compromise and unite to break union power in their trade. As Harris shows, the most energetic leaders of the Open Shop movement in Philadelphia came not from the city's largest employers—such as Midvale Steel or Baldwin Locomotive—but rather from the middle-sized firms whose owners were more likely to have built their businesses from the ground up.

- 6 In the ensuing struggle between management and labor, the key to victory was control of the labor market—a second neglected subject area illuminated in this study. The employers' most effective tool in the battle for labor market power was the employment bureau which the MMA set up to keep records on all of the skilled workmen in the city (including notes on their union affiliation). Although this agency did not function as well as some of its planners hoped (due to the unevenness of the employers' data keeping), during labor conflicts it effectively delivered a steady supply of skilled non-union workers to shops on strike. One of Harris's most interesting findings is that Philadelphia's skilled workers' unions found it impossible to keep their own members from using the MMA's employment bureau to locate work during times of rising unemployment. Combined with the occasional employment of labor spies and injunctions issued by sympathetic courts, the labor bureau and some convenient recessionary periods helped the MMA drive unionism from Philadelphia's metal working shops in a series of battles between 1905 and 1911.
- 7 Despite the natural advantages employers enjoyed in their successful battle with trade unionism, the stability of Open Shop Philadelphia was not enduring. World War I triggered developments that even the MMA could not control. The war tightened labor markets in a way that gave workers leverage; it introduced dynamics that eroded metal employers' tightknit solidarity; and it saw the federal government intrude into labor relations with mediation efforts that ultimately enhanced union organizing. By 1918 the Open Shop was in retreat.
- 8 Had the war lasted longer, it may have destroyed the Open Shop altogether. As it was, not only did the MMA's Open Shop ideal survive the war, in many ways it emerged from post-war labor struggles improved and enhanced by a war-born reform vision. By the mid-1920s, the MMA had modernized its approach under the leadership of a new group of moralistic Quaker businessmen, most notably Morris E. Leeds. The revitalized MMA became a leading force for welfare capitalism in Philadelphia. It promoted personnel management techniques, built ties with researchers at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, developed a training program for skilled workers, and brought the city's larger employers such as Disston and General Electric into its fold. By 1929 the MMA's Open Shop vision, now reformed and retooled in light of the labor upheavals of World War I, seemed more secure than ever.
- 9 But the Great Depression and the New Deal pulled the rug from under the reformed MMA. The group's futile efforts to rally its members around a voluntaristic response to unemployment were abandoned within the first few years of the depression and its training programs and promotion of welfare capitalism collapsed. Lacking credible alternatives, the MMA embraced elements of the early New Deal in hopes that it could replace economic chaos with order. But the stimulus that Roosevelt's administration provided to trade unionism soon converted the MMA into a zealously anti-New Deal organization. And between 1933 and 1936 the MMA spent more than ever before to battle trade unionism. Ultimately, though, the MMA accommodated to what it could not change. Ever the hard-nosed realists, its members accepted collective bargaining when no better alternative seemed available. Rather than championing the traditional Open Shop, the MMA's post-1937 mission was to help its members make the best of the new situation, limiting union power and resisting government intrusion wherever possible without fighting the idea of collective bargaining itself.

- 10 The account of how the MMA first resisted and then accommodated itself to the New Deal Order is likely to be seen as the most significant contribution of Harris's book in years to come. His analysis of this process in turn addresses three large interrelated questions that together provide a basis for evaluating twentieth-century U.S. labor history: to what extent was the union renewal of the 1930s primarily the product of grass-roots labor militancy? What role did the state play in the process of labor reform? And what was the significance for workers of the labor regime that emerged in this period? Each of these questions has elicited energetic and often passionate scholarly debate in the past. Harris weighs in on them with characteristic clarity and his judgements, rooted as they are in a finely detailed understanding of Philadelphia's employers, command attention.
- 11 Harris argues convincingly that Philadelphia workers' militancy and self-organization "followed rather than preceded state encouragement and endorsement" (356). Furthermore, he dismisses the contentions of Staughton Lynd and some New Left-influenced labor historians who have suggested that the emergence of "bureaucratic" CIO-style industrial unionism stifled a more radical grass-roots style of worker militancy. The union institutions that emerged from the 1930s did not so much muffle militancy as channel it, Harris argues. Industrial unions were the product of the realization that "militancy required strategy, direction, and discipline" and "to keep what it won, it required institutionalization" (357).
- 12 In Harris's estimation, the orientation of government—local, state-level, and federal—was in turn crucial to trade unionism's breakthrough in Philadelphia. He argues that the election of a liberal mayor and a liberal state government, together with the New Deal's labor policies, were decisive in undermining the Open Shop in the mid-1930s. "The cumulative effect" of employers' "experiences at the hands of the city, state, and federal governments was to make the MMA rethink the wisdom of the belligerent course it had pursued," according to Harris (402). New Deal era governments at the local, state, or national levels were scarcely the handmaidens of capital—rather the state provided a crucial force "bearing in to crush the Open Shop" (397).
- 13 What then was the significance of the great shift in labor relations that occurred in the 1930s? Harris's argument here rejects the contentions of Colin Gordon and some other recent commentators who have emphasized the degree to which employers accepted and even valued the logic of collective bargaining, exploiting unionization to both stabilize competitive labor markets and restrain autonomous shop-floor militancy. To the contrary, the MMA staunchly resisted unionism's advance, Harris contends, until it became clear that labor's advance simply could not be rolled back. "The pressure of an apparently unstoppable labor movement enjoying widespread public support" and "increasingly effective governmental backing" finally helped to persuade the MMA's leaders that "the time for adopting a new approach that was more in keeping with the requirements" of the "unwanted New Deal Order" had arrived (405). None of the MMA's members, had wanted the New Deal collective bargaining system, Harris tells us, but all more or less accepted it. To be sure, the collective bargaining regime did in some ways aid the MMA's historic mission of rationalizing the labor markets of Philadelphia's metal trades, and employers could console themselves with this. But the rationalization that came through collective bargaining cost employers more in terms of the loss of individual autonomy and power than they would have been prepared to tolerate had they had it in their power to do otherwise.

- 14 The implications of Harris's analysis are obvious: it was not that workers won a "counterfeit" victory in the 1930s, one that employers helped to influence and even engineer. Rather, workers' gains came over the energetic opposition of employers who would have preferred a far different dispensation.
- 15 Its members having made their reluctant peace with the New Deal Order, the MMA turned to the task of better equipping them to influence and limit the collective bargaining regime. That was a much longer and more complex battle—it was also one that the MMA would ultimately win, though the contest would take decades to play out. In the end the MMA—through its successor organization, the Mid-Atlantic Employers' Association (MEA)—outlived the New Deal Order. And, as Harris notes in an afterward to the book, the remnants of the employers' association movement are today presiding over a the virtual collapse of the collective bargaining regime and the vibrant union movement whose aggressive organizing had called the employers' movement into being at the dawn of the 20th century.
- 16 Harris's tale is occasionally overly dense. And at times it tells us simultaneously too much about Philadelphia's metal manufacturing entrepreneurs and too little about the actual effects that their policies had on wage rates and labor market structures in their industry. But the relatively minor flaws in this ponderous volume are more than redeemed by the broad vision that informs it and that fact that its narrative is told with great heart, keen wit, and an amiably combative style.
- 17 *Bloodless Victories* is a book that in many ways defies easy categorization. Yet, as Harris notes, it is ultimately "a book about power" (1). Few recent labor historians have grasped the dynamics of labor power more surely nor revealed its contested history as well as Harris. Scholars would be wise to pay attention to the arguments of this important book.
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