

## Response

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I want to thank Eric Arnesen and *Labor* for organizing this “Up for Debate” on the AFL in the Progressive Era. I also want to thank each of the commentators for their substantive and constructive engagement with my article and its arguments. The four essays by Melvyn Dubofsky, Donna T. Haverty-Stacke, Andrew Wender Cohen, and Julie Greene offer quite varied views on how best to characterize the Progressive Era AFL—part of what makes engaging with this set of commentaries so stimulating—but each makes a contribution to our thinking anew about, as Andrew Cohen puts it, the “nation’s dominant labor federation.” We seem to be at a moment of new openness to reconsidering some of labor history’s most deeply embedded frameworks and terminology and to formulating alternatives that better capture the messy, contradictory, and evolving history of working people’s lives and politics. It’s exciting to be part of that conversation.

Let me restate as concisely as possible the argument of “Pure and Simple Radicalism: Putting the AFL in Its Time.” My overarching point was a simple, perhaps even self-evident one: the Progressive Era AFL was a multidimensional, complex organization, heterogeneous in membership, structure, and politics. Thus, to describe the AFL as an organization of skilled conservative craftsmen is to see one side only and miss the whole. My aim was not, as Julie Greene suggests, to substitute one monolithic view of the AFL with another or “replace one label with another.” Rather, my hope was that by calling attention to the mixed-skill character and structure of the AFL and by exploring the radicalism of pure and simple trade unionism—a side often overlooked—we could begin to move toward a fuller understanding of who joined the AFL, how they organized themselves, and what they believed.

All four commentaries help deepen our sense of the AFL’s radical dimensions as well as its conservative side. Dubofsky, like Haverty-Stacke and Cohen, affirms my core argument about the radicalism of pure and simple trade unionism. Dubofsky offers a deft summary of the older labor history scholarship and its consensus on the AFL’s conservatism. He then recounts how his own assessment of Gompers and the AFL has shifted over the years, in part as a result of his involvement as an adviser to the Gompers Papers editorial project. For “substantial evidence” of “how relatively

radical Gompers was throughout his life,” Dubofsky recommends dipping into the now complete multivolume set of Gompers’s published papers.

But Dubofsky sees the AFL *becoming* conservative by the 1920s. I agree that as business interests gained new legitimacy and power, as national politics tilted rightward, as William Green took over from Gompers, and as the AFL’s membership among miners, garment workers, and other “new unionists” declined from its wartime peak, the AFL had less power and influence and in many instances became less confrontational. But it is also important to remember, as I detailed, that the AFL’s legislative drive for the right to strike, to bargain, and to organize continued in the 1920s, with some success first at the state level and then with increasing national momentum after 1928 as electoral gains occurred among progressive politicians in Congress and in the state houses.

Equally significant but not elaborated upon in “Pure and Simple Radicalism” is the AFL’s ongoing push for shorter hours in the 1920s and 1930s, a demand that in the view of its advocates was not just a route to greater leisure but also a way to enhance workers’ bargaining power, raise wages, and ensure that workers shared the fruits of new technology and higher productivity. Shorter-hour reform—by the late 1920s a demand for the six-hour day, thirty-hour week—was a different solution to unemployment than the economic expansionist interventions later embraced by the CIO unions. Shorter hours would redistribute work and raise hourly wages but not increase production or lengthen hours. It cured the problems of underconsumption *and* overproduction. Reaffirmed resoundingly at the AFL’s 1926 New Orleans convention, shorter-hour reform was central to the AFL’s economic and political analysis in the 1920s and 1930s. Adherence to it was part of why the AFL was not that enamored of unemployment benefits or state-mandated wages and hours. Better to have everyone working a few hours, the argument went, than some overworking and others with no work at all. Also, better to increase worker bargaining power than state power, particularly at a moment when a new, more labor-friendly New Deal Democratic coalition had yet to be secured at the federal level, repressive state labor laws and regulation still flourished under antilabor governors and legislatures, and the courts routinely prohibited the exercise of labor’s basic civil rights, most notably free speech and assembly.

The AFL at this moment has been most memorably described by its critics as little more than “an association of coffin societies.”<sup>1</sup> Yet this supposedly moribund, irrelevant organization mounted a federal legislative campaign for shorter hours in the early 1930s that included the Black Bill in the Senate and the Connelly Bill in the House. The bills essentially prohibited the interstate or foreign sale or purchase of goods produced by “long-hour” workers (those working more than six hours a day or thirty hours a week). On one notable occasion, William Green even threatened a “national strike” over the issue and promised the use of “every weapon; eco-

1. As quoted in Henry Pelling, *American Labor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 178.

conomic, political, and industrial at our disposal.” The Black Bill passed the Senate in April 1933 and, according to Benjamin Hunnicutt, helped convince FDR he needed more ambitious legislative proposals to address not just the banking crisis, which had absorbed much of his attention, but also the unemployment crisis. Hunnicutt chronicles the demise of the shorter-hour movement in the late 1930s, but he and others such as David Roediger, Philip Foner, and most recently Rosanne Currarino are clear that shorter hours, a prime objective of the AFL from the 1880s to the 1930s, was a radically transformative aspiration.<sup>2</sup>

Dubofsky rightly reminds readers of “another darker and more conservative side to the AFL and Gompers” in the Progressive Era that I do not explore in “Pure and Simple Radicalism”: Gompers’s own racism and the discriminatory practices toward African Americans, Asians, and other groups by some of the most powerful AFL affiliates. We have long known that racism and racist policies were deeply entrenched in the Progressive Era AFL. Yet there is much more to learn and to say on the subject. As I stated in my essay, although my focus was on a different dimension of the AFL’s philosophy and practice, that did not mean I regarded the AFL’s record on race, gender, nationality, religion, or any other kind of invidious distinction as “unimportant, irrelevant to how the federation is to be characterized, or fully settled.” We need studies, to take just one example, that can help us understand how the AFL compared to other national institutions of its day on these questions: was it more or less racially integrated, for instance, than women’s suffrage organizations or political parties, churches, or business associations? As Dubofsky’s comments indicate, we also need studies that aspire to capture not only the contradictory beliefs of most people, past and present, but also the progressive and retrogressive faces of most organizations.

Haverty-Stacke finds my arguments about the mixed-skill and organizational forms of the Progressive Era AFL convincing and welcomes my efforts to sketch out the radical dimensions of pure and simple trade unionism. She asks, however, for more attention to “how and why” the various labels came to adhere to the AFL and its challengers, what these labels meant at the time, and how and why certain terms were picked up and perpetuated by successive generations of activists and intellectuals. Haverty-Stacke is opening up an intriguing and uncharted terrain for research and contemplation. I had no idea of the context in which Gompers used “pure and simple” in 1890 until I began digging, and I was surprised by the staying power of Daniel DeLeon’s redefinition of the phrase as well as by how entrenched his characterization of the AFL’s beliefs came to be in the scholarship. I could not pursue very fully in “Pure and Simple Radicalism” the questions Haverty-Stacke raises in her

2. Quotes from Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt, “The End of Shorter Hours,” *Labor History* 25 (Summer 1984): 373–404. See also David Roediger and Philip Foner, *Our Own Time: A History of American Labor and the Working Day* (New York: Praeger, 1989), and Rosanne Currarino, “‘To Taste of Life’s Sweets’: The Eight-Hour Movement and the Origins of Modern Liberalism,” *Labor’s Heritage* 12, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2004): 22–33.

perceptive comments, but I too would like to know more about the “how and why” as well as the “what.”

Helpfully, Greene, Cohen, and Dubofsky all weigh in on how the AFL was perceived at the time and on what labels were used by whom and for what reason. They reach quite different conclusions, however. Greene contends that only the Far Right considered the AFL radical. In contrast, Dubofsky and Cohen include a much broader swath of the population among those who regarded the ideas and practices of the AFL as radical. Cohen directs our view toward the courts and the many judges who issued and enforced sweeping repressive injunctions against AFL unionists and their sympathizers—jailing picketers, union organizers, or simply those who “slowed down” or refused to work. And it was not just the ear-rippers or the strikers or shirkers who found themselves criminalized. The courts sentenced Gompers, John Mitchell, and Frank Morrison to twelve, nine, and six months in jail, respectively, for violating an injunction against, among other things, printing and distributing in the *American Federationist* a “Do Not Patronage” list of “unfair” firms that included the Buck’s Stove Company.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Cohen and Dubofsky point out that not just the judges but also the media and much of the intellectual, political, and business elite, then as now, condemned unions and union power and feared granting workers “full freedom” to strike, boycott, and organize fundamentally threatened individual rights, “free” markets, and capitalist hegemony.

I agree with Cohen that we won’t fully understand the radicalism of the AFL until we more fully acknowledge its demands for worker control. It is no accident that syndicalism and the challenge to employer power at the workplace lay at the heart of the reform program of both the AFL and the IWW. The political rights of US workers in the early twentieth century compared favorably with those of workers in many other industrialized nations, but the same cannot be said for their workplace rights. The power and arrogance of US capital, with its fierce allegiance to the right to manage and to its legal fictions of personhood and property rights, was formidable. It was these prerogatives of capital that the AFL sought to challenge, and it was this challenge, among others, that made it and its principles so subversive of the social order.

Cohen offers a rich description of the job and market control aspirations of AFL workers at the local level and the efforts of AFL affiliates to determine “who could work, what materials could be used, and even the prices of the finished product.” At the same time, he makes a crucial point that not all militancy and job control unionism is radical. I agree: It is essential to ask, militancy for what?

Yet Cohen claims Gompers “stressed contractualism, the idea that unions should abandon their day-to-day control of the worksite in return for stable agree-

3. On the *Buck’s Stove and Range Company v. Gompers* (1907–14) case, see Daniel R. Ernst, *Lawyers against Labor: From Individual Rights to Corporate Liberalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 110–12, 130–46. Eventually settled without jail time for the AFL leaders, the case, as Ernst argues, helped liberalize US law and politics. It did not, however, secure for labor the economic rights and power the AFL sought.

ments setting wages and hours.” In my view, “contractualism,” as defined by Cohen, does not describe what Gompers and the national AFL desired or practiced. Worker control aspirations were integral to what Gompers had in mind when he agitated for “independent trade unionism” and were intertwined—not counterposed, as Cohen suggests—with the national AFL’s efforts to secure higher wages and shorter hours for workers and thereby reduce inequality and overwork.

“Contractualism”—a term I associate with David Brody’s account of the post–World War II system of formalized labor-management negotiations constrained by law and government agencies and resulting in a legally enforceable, highly detailed set of workplace rules—may be an appropriate descriptor for the post–World War II decades. But it bears little resemblance to how collective bargaining operated in the pre–Wagner Act period. Many of the AFL’s local “contracts” or “working rules” were often first negotiated among workers; employers secured a steady supply of qualified workers by agreeing to abide by the standards the union set. Securing as well as enforcing these agreements fell to the workers themselves, not to an arbitrator or a state agency.<sup>4</sup>

Julie Greene’s thoughtful and engaged commentary raises key interpretative issues about the Progressive Era AFL and helps further clarify what is radical and what is conservative about the federation. At bottom, Greene reaffirms her 1990s portrait of the national AFL in the decades before World War I as a conservative behemoth standing in the way of real progressive reform. In so doing, she demonstrates the tenacity of the conventional wisdom about the AFL and makes clear the pillars on which that judgment rests.

Gompers and the AFL were racist, sexist, and imperialist, Greene contends. I agree. Indeed, that pretty well describes the Progressive Era and many of the reformers and reform movements in it. But can people or organizations deemed racist or sexist or imperialist *also* be described along other dimensions, even radical ones? I think the answer is yes. Take Jack London, for example, or Big Bill Heywood, or the Socialist Party. And I also agree that a full rendering of the AFL’s ideas and practices should encompass all the many facets of its work, including its imperial and internationalist politics. Greene has done remarkable scholarship along these latter lines in her masterful *The Canal Builders: Making America’s Empire at the Panama Canal* (2009), and we are all greatly in her debt. My aim in “Pure and Simple Radicalism” was different and of necessity more circumscribed: I sought to make a case for the heterogeneous nature of the AFL and direct attention to the all-too-often-ignored challenge it and its cardinal principles posed to the power and ideology of US capitalists on their home turf.

4. On “workplace contractualism,” see David Brody, *In Labor’s Cause: Main Themes on the History of the American Worker* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), chapter 6. On how unions set workplace standards prior to the New Deal, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, “Organizing the Postindustrial Work Force: Lessons from the History of Waitress Unionism,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 44 (April 1991): 419–36.

Gompers and the AFL leadership could not possibly be radical, Greene also contends, because they opposed and “suppressed” those within the AFL who, in her view, *were* radical. To drive home her point, she rehashes internal struggles within the AFL and concludes that Gompers’s tactics resulted in ensuring that “whatever radicalism existed in the AFL was at the local level.” The real progressives, she later elaborates, largely consisted of those who supported the Socialist Party, “more far-reaching state intervention,” and the creation of independent labor parties.

By those criteria, of course, Gompers and the AFL do not qualify as radicals. Yet as Greene notes, I argued that not all radicals favored the Socialist Party, independent labor parties, or increased state power and intervention. But I also found pure and simple trade unionism radical because it mounted a fundamental challenge to laissez-faire capitalism and to the Progressive Era class structures and ideologies that upheld it.

Frankly, we need more attention to what the AFL actually sought to achieve and less vitriol over its rejection of the Socialist Party or an independent labor party, particularly if these battles are recounted as if any opposition to socialism or socialists by the AFL leadership is *prima facie* evidence of “suppression.” When is winning an election by two-thirds of the vote “suppression”? Yes, Gompers was a fierce infighter (unlike his opponents?), but in the end, he was a democrat. By that, I mean he actually stepped down when he was voted out of office in 1894. He resisted cutting off the ears of his opponents.

We are once again in an age of great inequality; an era of worldwide unemployment and overwork; and a moment of rising Social Darwinism and disdain for the poor and working classes. It is not a coincidence that Charles Murray’s new book, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2000* (2012), is a rant about how those at the bottom of the class heap are lazy, immoral, and of limited intelligence. Just as the slave-owners needed racism to sustain their rule, so too the new plutocracy requires a classist ideology to justify its dominance. Pure and simple trade unionism mounted a long and continuous challenge to the class ideologies of its time and to those who perpetrated and profited from them. The AFL’s radical challenge to the maldistribution of wealth, power, and prestige did not end in the nineteenth century and was not just sustained by socialist radicals. It gained force in the early twentieth century as the American labor movement expanded and finally found enough allies by the 1930s to claim some significant victories. ■