Introduction to “David Dubinsky, the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union and the Limits of Social Democratic Trade Unionism”

Victor G. Devinatz

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In the history of the twentieth-century US trade union movement, certain labor leaders and their unions have played major roles in the trajectory of US labor’s theory and practice. One of these leaders and unions is undoubtedly David Dubinsky and the labor organization that he led, the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU). As the ILGWU president for more than three decades, Dubinsky obtained and extended many gains of this originally socialist union in, for example, health care, housing and recreation. Furthermore, the garment workers’ leader was also a valiant fighter against Nazism and Fascism throughout the tumultuous 1930s and 1940s. In spite of these significant achievements, Dubinsky ran the ILGWU with an iron hand, brooking no opposition to his autocratic rule within the union. In this issue’s “Perspectives” Section, I have authored a review essay of Robert Parmet’s recent biography of Dubinsky that, for the most part, lauds the union leader for his contributions to the US and international labor movements. However, contra Parmet, I argue in this essay that in spite of his many achievements, Dubinsky’s vehement anti-Communism was extremely detrimental towards the forging of a national and international working class unity during the early and middle decades of the twentieth-century.

I welcome employment relations scholars to contribute future review essays analyzing important books in the different areas of employment relations from any one of a variety of theoretical perspectives. Moreover, if any of the journal’s readers would like to respond to essays published in the “Perspectives” Section or would like to write on any topic in the field of employee relations, please do not hesitate to contact me with your proposal. I welcome both practitioner-based and scholarly-based articles. I hope that you enjoy this review essay and find it most illuminating.

V. G. Devinatz (✉)
Department of Management & Quantitative Methods, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-5580,
USA
e-mail: vgdevin@ilstu.edu