

Doug Fraser's 1978 Resignation Letter from the Labor-Management Group and the Limits of Trade Union Liberalism

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Jefferson Cowie's interpretation of the 1978 letter of resignation of Doug Fraser, the then-President of the United Auto Workers (UAW), from the Labor-Management Group is quite insightful in arguing that this document indicated 'the historic limits of US labor' and 'the limited role for unions and a long and unrelenting campaign against the collective voice for American workers by business and the state' in the post-World War II industrial relations system.¹ However, Cowie's argument would be considerably strengthened by pointing out the orientation of Fraser's letter in helping us to understand the ultimate weakness of the US trade union movement in the three decades after World War II. Specifically, Cowie's analysis could have been further extended by indicating what Fraser's letter tells us about how the US trade union movement was weakened by the *top-down strategies*, even when implemented by progressive or social democratic union leaders such as Doug Fraser, that it adopted in the immediate postwar period. Specifically, as is indicative of Fraser's letter, the US trade union movement's strategy was based on a *perceived* compact between *union leaders* and *business leaders* as opposed to the labor movement basing its strength on the activity of union members on and off of the shop floor. However, as demonstrated by the rank and file revolt in the 1960s and continuing through the 1970s, members in many unions neither perceived nor accepted a social accord with capital in the same manner as that of their leaders. In fact, rather than trying to utilize this rank and file power to build and strengthen the union movement in order to obtain concessions from capital, labor leaders tried to eliminate it in order to prevent damaging their perceived cooperative relationship with business leaders.²

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Moreover, Cowie is incorrect when he states that Fraser's resignation letter represented 'an attempt (failed as it turned out) to break out of the limits of the postwar bargaining system that constrained working class politics within the Democratic Party and restricted shopfloor power to the confines of the collective bargaining system.'³ In contrast to Cowie's interpretation that the letter represented Fraser's desire to seriously explore the organization of a third (progressive) political party in opposition to the Democratic Party, the political vehicle that was formally established in 1979 as a result of Fraser's frustrations as indicated in his letter was never designed to be the embryo of a progressive political party but only as a mechanism to push the Democratic Party to the left at a time when Fraser felt that the party was not living up to what was contained in its platform.

As Cowie points out, another standard interpretation of Fraser's letter is that it represented the end of the 'golden age' of the three decades of postwar industrial relations where a 'fragile, unwritten compact' was rejected by business.⁴ However, determining whether business ever accepted this 'social compact' with labor upon the conclusion of World War II is neither important nor necessary for understanding the top-down strategies that the US trade union leaders embraced throughout the 1970s as indicated in the subtext of Fraser's letter. Clearly, from the language and phraseology that Fraser uses, it is apparent that he, as the leader of one of the strongest industrial unions in postwar America, *believed* and *acted* as if a social accord *was* in effect between *union leaders* and *business leaders* with no mention of the role of rank and file members in ultimately affecting the labor relations process by the late 1970s. For example, in his letter, Fraser states, 'For a considerable time, the leaders between business and labor have sat at the Labor-Management Group's table—recognizing differences, but seeking consensus where it existed.'⁵

However, after the defeat of labor law reform in 1978, according to Fraser, there was no attempt at reaching a consensus, instead business leaders were launching 'a one-sided class war' against the unions. Viewing themselves as equal, as opposed to junior, partners with capital, US labor leaders' belief of capital rejecting this partnership is indicated by Fraser's statement, 'The leaders of industry, commerce, and finance in the United States have broken and discarded the fragile, unwritten compact previously existing during a past period of growth and progress.' In describing his own union's cooperative approach towards its relationship with General Motors (GM), Fraser states, 'GM, the largest manufacturing corporation in the world, has received responsibility, productivity and cooperation from the UAW and its members....We have given stability and have been rewarded with hostility....'⁶

Furthermore, in criticizing this 'new' orientation of capital, Fraser goes on to state that business is irreconcilably opposed to labor's progressive legislative agenda which includes the fight for national health insurance, the Humphrey-Hawkins full employment bill, increases in the minimum wage and the continued funding of Social Security. The point is that the strategy of the US trade union movement in the late 1970s, as well as during the previous generation, as indicated by Fraser's letter, was based on a *perceived* social accord where high-level union leaders worked closely, and at times cooperatively with business leaders, in hopes of trying to convince capital to

work with labor on achieving its agenda. When it became evident that business leaders were opposed to this program, labor leaders felt betrayed after having cooperated with capital in stabilizing and institutionalizing industrial relations in the three decades after the end of World War II.

In commenting on his resignation letter and the events that led up to it, Fraser's recent comments indicate the cooperative dynamics perceived by the labor leaders with regard to their interactions with the business leaders in the Labor-Management Group. He states, '...(U)pon reflection, the letter was written with a degree of anger because we were very optimistic that we could get labor law reform enacted....Particularly when you sit and you talk about attacking problems in our society through this collaborative, cooperative effort and then almost behind your back, they frustrate the labor movement from getting really very modest reforms in labor law.'⁷

In spite of the labor leaders' intimate cooperation with business leaders, it is interesting to note that Fraser does not claim that labor's achievements were obtained through the presence of this *perceived* social accord *per se*. Rather, he acknowledges that the gains achieved by labor 'came only after sustained struggle, such as that waged by the labor movement in the 1930s',⁸ clearly referring to the aggressive organizing strategies, including the widespread use of sit-down strikes during 1936–1938, of the newly-formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions.

Even though Fraser's letter references the 'sustained struggle' of the US trade union movement in the 1930s that helped to build the CIO unions, he neglects to mention the significant role that the most recent rank and file rebellions had played in impacting the US industrial relations system. Beginning in the second half of the 1960s and continuing into the 1970s, such revolts—as indicated by the dramatic increases in the holding of both officially sanctioned as well as wildcat strikes—put tremendous pressure on capital and reveal that rank and file members in many unions neither perceived nor accepted a social accord with capital as did their leaders. This intensifying conflict between labor and capital was due to an increase in both the inflation and unemployment rates and a deceleration in the growth rate of real wages followed by an actual (real) wage decrease which ultimately led to an expansion of these strike movements in the United States.

The strike rate started to increase in the mid-1960s with the highest growth occurring in both relative and absolute terms from 1965 through 1971. In 1970, the total number of work stoppages (5,716) surpassed the number of strikes that occurred in 1946 (4,985), the highest in the entire post-World War II era up to that time. In addition, more workers struck in 1970 than in any year in the postwar period, except 1946 and 1952, and only in 1946 and 1959 was the amount of man-days lost to strikes greater.⁹ An article in *Time* even acknowledged that the 1970 strike wave was 'the worst epidemic of strikes since just after World War II.'¹⁰

There was a slight downturn in the number of strikes from 1971 through 1973, an average of 5,167 per year. However, when the US government removed controls over wage increases in April 1974, unionized workers struck with an increasing ferocity in order to make up for their wage losses, leading to the holding of 6,074 work stoppages

in 1974, a record high in US history. In the remaining years of the decade, strike activity declined somewhat due to the economic recession of 1974–1975 which was the most severe since the onset of the Great Depression in the 1930s.¹¹

While the number of officially sanctioned strikes exploded during the decade from the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s, according to Moody, '(t)he new rank-and-file rebellion of the 1960s was, above all, a wildcat strike movement.'¹² The frequency of wildcat strikes—those work stoppages occurring during the duration of the collective bargaining agreement—doubled throughout the decade from approximately 1,000 in 1960 to 2,000 in 1969.¹³

Not all of these wildcat strikes were short and limited solely to the level of the local union. For example, airline mechanics who were members of the International Association of Machinists struck several airlines in 1966 immobilizing 60 percent of the nation's airline traffic. Striking under the slogan, 'We're working under chain-gang conditions for cotton-picking wages,' the mechanics stayed out for five weeks disregarding not only their union leaders' commands but then-President Johnson's call that they return to work.¹⁴

Four years later in 1970, the national wildcat strikes of postal workers and Teamsters shook the country. Although legally prohibited from striking because of their status as federal employees, with the US Congress holding hearings over then-President Nixon's plan to reorganize postal labor relations and the leaders of the National Association of Letter Carriers and the National Postal Union refusing to take decisive action, New York City postal workers took matters into their own hands and wildcatted on 18 March, 1970. Within two days the wildcat strike had spread like wildfire and had become, according to Brenner, 'the largest wildcat strike in US history,' with 200,000 postal employees shutting down postal services in major cities as well as smaller towns throughout the nation. In the aftermath of the eight-day strike, the postal workers had gained an immediate 14 percent wage gain and had achieved significant collective bargaining rights.¹⁵

Upon the 1 April expiration of the National Master Freight Agreement, members of the Teamsters, like the postal workers two weeks earlier, walked off their jobs. However, when then-Teamster President Frank Fitzsimmons negotiated a tentative contract that would be retroactively applied to 1 April, he ordered the wildcatters to return to work on 2 April. Many complied although workers in different regions of the country remained out for a significantly longer period of time. For example, St. Louis Teamsters struck for a month while Los Angeles Teamsters stayed out for two months.¹⁶

Waves of wildcat strikes continued to erupt throughout the early 1970s, with three major walkouts hitting Detroit-area Chrysler plants in the summer of 1973 over speedup imposed by racist supervisors and the occurrence of numerous health and safety violations. Wildcat strikes continued to occur in waves in coalmining through 1974 although the economic recession of 1974–1975 terminated this rank and file militancy.¹⁷

While Fraser concludes his letter by arguing that '(w)e in the UAW intend to reforge the links with those who believe in struggle: the kind of people who sat down in the

factories in the 1930s...in making new alliances and forming new coalitions to help our nation find its way,¹⁸ these allusions to the development of new political partnerships that appear in the letter were not meant to imply that Fraser would actively involve UAW rank and file members in such an effort to achieve the union's goals. According to Fraser, in addition to other formal labor organizations, the groups that he had in mind for creating a new coalition when he made this statement were politically liberal groups that were *not* specifically connected to rank and file workers *per se* such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Americans for Democratic Action.¹⁹

Shortly after writing his resignation letter, Fraser did follow through with his promise of forming a broad liberal coalition in an attempt to help labor achieve its agenda although it did not involve or depend upon the participation of either UAW members, union members or workers *per se*. Rather, the coalition founded in 1979, named the Progressive Alliance, involved a multitude of 'labor, civil rights, environmental, citizen action' and other social movement groups, who according to Battista, represented a 'politics of the organization elites.'²⁰ Although Cowie states that Fraser 'raised the specter of organizing a third party' shortly after publicly presenting his resignation letter and claims that '(t)he debate over starting a third party or reforming the Democrats swirled around the (Progressive Alliance) convention to the point that it became the problem without a solution,'²¹ neither Fraser nor the Progressive Alliance ever seriously considered the launching of a third party.

The periodic raising of organizing a third party by US trade union leaders in the first decade of the post-World War II era served the same purpose as did Fraser's organizing of the Progressive Alliance; both represented attempts at pushing the Democratic Party to the left. The specter of forming a third party from the mid-1940s through the early 1950s, as did Fraser's organizing of the Progressive Alliance, arose because US trade union leaders were frustrated with the politics of Democratic Party administrations. Furthermore, when third party discussion did occur, it happened within the context of relegating the organization of such a party to the distant future when it would not affect the Democratic Party's chances in the upcoming election.

For example, at the end of May 1946 after Truman had proposed a military labor draft bill, Truman's anti-labor stand led to a revival of talk of the establishment of a labor party among both rank and file workers and labor leaders. At this time, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union leader, David Dubinsky, called for the formation of an independent labor party during his address to the United Hatters, Cap and Millinery Workers convention in early June 1946 when he stated that the trade unions 'cannot satisfy themselves with a party that includes the Southern reactionaries or the industrialists in the Republican party.'²² Although the frustrations which trade union leaders felt concerning Truman continued into the election year of 1948, the proposal to organize a labor party was only mentioned as a possibility *after* 1948. Louis Hollander, the New York CIO state head, in an interview, stated, 'Some day we will have a real independent Labor Party built from the bottom up' which 'will be the second or even the first party.'²³ Even with their dissatisfaction of Truman, trade

union leaders viewed it as a necessity that the Democratic Party prevail in the 1948 elections.

The announcement of Truman's 'economic stabilization' program shortly after the start of the Korean War in June 1950 led top trade union leaders from the American Federation of Labor, the CIO, the railroad brotherhoods and the International Association of Machinists to form the United Labor Policy Committee (ULPC). Disgust with Truman's operation of the war-time economy led ULPC members as well as other union leaders to mention, once more, the possibility of establishing a third party or a labor party. At a ULPC conference held in Washington DC in March 1951, one of the 700 delegates raised the issue of establishing either a labor party or a farmer-labor party although the conference failed to adopt the resolution.²⁴

At the UAW convention held shortly after the conclusion of the ULPC conference in early April 1951, a debate and a vote occurred on a labor party proposal, the first time since 1936. The minority resolution endorsing the formation of an independent labor party was put forward while the majority resolution, which represented Reuther's stand, did not call for the organization of a new party but called upon the ULPC to hold a Conference of Labor in the spring of 1952 before the Democratic and Republican Party conventions to determine the course of action that should be taken during the 1952 campaign. Supporting the majority resolution meant, for all intents and purposes, that there would be no time to form a labor party for the 1952 elections.²⁵

During the ensuing debate, no delegate, including Reuther, spoke in opposition to the minority resolution's advocacy of the formation of a labor party *per se*. Many speakers in favor of the majority resolution 'even expressed sympathy for the "sentiments" of the labor party advocates.' Their main criticism of the resolution was with the 'strategy and tactics' promoted by the minority or as Reuther argued, 'with the "timing" of the labor party resolution.'²⁶ With Reuther's vigorous backing, the majority resolution easily passed.²⁷

Like Reuther in 1951, Fraser in 1979 claimed that he was not *philosophically* opposed *in principle* to the formation of a third party *per se* but, once more, the practical issue was a matter of timing. At the first meeting of the Alliance, Fraser affirmed that the organizing of a third party was 'not a good idea at the present time; it just wouldn't work.' At this time, Fraser argued that the major objective of the organization should be the reform and the development of a more progressive agenda within the Democratic Party. According to Fraser, organizing a third party would have been 'absolutely futile' because it would take too long before it 'would be a very effective force.' Another reason for his opposition to the formation of a third party at the time was that labor was 'very influential in the Democratic Party' and that the party's 'platform certainly speaks to most of the problems in the labor movement and society, generally.' The real problem of having the US labor movement work within the Democratic Party, according to Fraser, was that 'we (the labor movement) never had a working majority...what I would call a philosophical majority.'²⁸

Furthermore, according to Battista, there was no real support within the coalition for building a third party. In a recent interview, Doug Fraser stated that the formation

of the Progressive Alliance was designed to promote a 'a more progressive politics in the United States.... It was to influence, perhaps, the Democratic Party in a more liberal, progressive direction.'²⁹ Thus, the real purpose of the Progressive Alliance was not to explore the possibility of building a third party based on a coalition of labor-liberal forces, as Cowie claims, but to function as a left-wing pressure group on the conservative-moving Democratic Party.

With trade union politics remaining limited to the Democratic Party and with employers launching their attacks on unions in spite of their leaders' cooperative and collaborative relations with them, the unions' weakness remained in spite of members' growing resistance on and off the shop floor. Although there was a revival of rank and file militancy in many unions throughout the 1960s and the 1970s as demonstrated by a considerable increase in the number of both officially sanctioned work stoppages and wildcat strikes, the energy generated from these actions were not used by trade union leaders, even progressive ones such as Fraser, throughout the 1970s in helping to revitalize their organizations as well as using them to counter the employers' 'one-sided class war' against the unions. Thus, when the (perceived) social accord appeared to unravel between labor leaders and business leaders by the late 1970s, the US labor movement had few options in confronting the economic crisis of the early 1980s which led to an era of concessionary bargaining, a renewal of labor-management cooperation virtually solely on management's terms and the continuing decline of union density.³⁰

Fraser's resignation letter represents the top-down strategy adopted by the US trade union movement in the three decades after the conclusion of World War II. Although the letter reveals the weakness of the strategy of trade union liberalism embraced among union leaders in the development of its relationship with capital in the postwar period, it neglects to explain what was occurring within portions of the labor movement on the shop floor that represented an incipient although not fully developed alternative to the leaders' adopted strategy.³¹ Any history of the US labor movement in the 1970s must acknowledge this and recognize the possibility of this alternative route not taken.

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Notes

- [1] Cowie, 'A One-Sided Class War', 309, 311.
- [2] For good discussions of the rank and file revolt that occurred within the labor unions during the 1960s and 1970s, see Guerin, *100 Years of Labor in the USA*, 198–226 and Moody, *An Injury to All*, 83–94.
- [3] Cowie, 'A One-Sided Class War', 308.
- [4] Ibid.
- [5] Ibid., 312.

- [6] Ibid., 312–13.
- [7] Doug Fraser interview with author, December 1, 2003.
- [8] Cowie, ‘“A One-Sided Class War”,’ 312.
- [9] Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Analysis of Work Stoppages, 1980*, 10; Preis, *Labor’s Giant Step: Twenty Years of the CIO*, 283.
- [10] ‘The Blue Collar Worker’s Lowdown Blues,’ *Time*, November 9 1970, 69.
- [11] Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Analysis of Work Stoppages, 1980*, 3.
- [12] Moody, *An Injury to All*, 85.
- [13] Ibid., 86.
- [14] Ibid.
- [15] Brenner, ‘Striking Against The State: The Postal Wildcat of 1970,’ 6, 10–12, 14, 21.
- [16] Friedman, *Teamster Rank and File: Power, Bureaucracy, and Rebellion at Work and in a Union*, 137–142. For another treatment of the Teamsters’ 1970 wildcat strike, see La Botz, *Rank and File Rebellion: Teamsters for a Democratic Union*, 30–38.
- [17] For a discussion of the three wildcat strikes at Chrysler, see Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 227–32; Moody, *An Injury to All*, 91–94.
- [18] Cowie, ‘“A One-Sided Class War”,’ 314.
- [19] Doug Fraser interview with author, December 1 2003.
- [20] Battista, ‘Labor and Coalition Politics,’ 421.
- [21] Cowie, ‘“A One-Sided Class War”,’ 310–11.
- [22] Preis, *Labor’s Giant Step*, 294.
- [23] Ibid., 364–65.
- [24] Ibid., 422–29.
- [25] Ibid., 429–33.
- [26] Ibid., 433.
- [27] Ibid., 434.
- [28] Battista, ‘Labor and Coalition Politics,’ 406; Doug Fraser interview with author, December 1 2003.
- [29] Ibid.
- [30] For coverage of these critical issues that confronted the US trade union movement in the early 1980s, see Moody, *An Injury to All*, 3–5, 165–91.
- [31] For example, for a discussion of the revival of shop floor militancy within various UAW locals during the late 1960s and 1970s, see Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 24–27, 46–48, 106–107, 110–13, 116–20, 227–31; Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers*, 88–89, 92–95, 98–101, 190–198 and Devinatz, ‘The Antipolitics and Politics of a New Left Union Caucus: The Workers’ Voice Committee of UAW Local 6, 1970–1975,’ 285–321.

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