Does the History of Labor Struggles Really Mandate a Vote for Joe Biden?

Posted on May 25, 2020 by Ahmed White

In this essay, Ahmed White argues that the recent profiling of the GM Strike of 1936-1937 as a model for the potential of a labor-Democratic Party-Joe Biden alliance is simplistic and misses the dire negative consequences of that alliance.

Erik Loomis's popular book, *A History of America in Ten Strikes*, has done the world a service by introducing the reading public to some of the more important labor struggles in American history and by reminding them of how significant these struggles were to advancing the rights and interests of American workers. For many, its reconsideration of "American history from the perspective of class struggle" will be a needed revelation (p.5). The book has recently served a more particular and dubious purpose, though, which is to provide Noam Chomsky with an argument from labor history to support his claim that workers and those who care about their interests must rally behind Joe Biden's candidacy for president. Chomsky used a recent appearance on *Democracy Now* to demand that

"progressives" vote for Biden in the name of labor. In so doing he appealed to Loomis's thesis that—as Chomsky puts it—efforts to improve labor's condition have "succeeded when there was a tolerant or sympathetic administration, not when there wasn't."

Noam Chomsky uses Erik Loomis' argument about labor's fortunes to advocate a vote for Joe Biden. Credit: Democracy Now.

Chomsky has recently appeared online with Loomis to promote the broader idea that leftists must overcome the cynicism and disinterest that are pathologies of "neoliberalism" and see their way clear to support mainstream, reformist efforts. He has also written a blurb that adorns the front cover of Loomis's book. And so it is not a surprise that Chomsky's reading of Loomis's book is largely accurate, and not only regarding its vision of history but also the supposed implications of that history for politics today.

In *Ten Strikes* Loomis, an accomplished historian at the University of Rhode Island, asserts that labor's great achievements over the last century or so have consistently depended upon what he calls a "combination of worker organizing and government action" (p.129). And so he says that workers must not only organize on the job and in the streets but also "place politicians in office who would support their goals" (p.226). Because the Republican Party is firmly opposed to labor, and because there "is nothing in American history that suggests third parties can succeed electorally" or that such parties ever "move the Democratic Party to the left," those who care about workers' rights and interests must therefore support the Democratic Party (p.226).

Re-assessing the Gamous GM Sit-Down Strike

At the center of Loomis's argument is an affair that Chomsky, like many other leftists, has often celebrated: the 1936-1937 General Motors Sit-Down Strike. The strike warrants its own chapter in Loomis' book. It also resurfaces in the book's conclusion, where it informs

his strongest injunctions about politics and how people should vote. Loomis is quite right to focus on this strike, as any discussion of the role of strikes in American history must reckon with that conflict. Moreover, the story of the GM Strike does seem to give considerable support to Loomis's primary claim—although only if it is read in a certain fashion.

Sitdown strikers in the Fisher body plant factory number three, Flint Michigan. This strike is a pivotal moment in labor history and at the center of assertions by Chomsky and Loomis about the value of rallying behind Joe Biden. Credit: Library of Congress

As Loomis recounts, and as many students of labor probably already know, workers' victory in that strike was a pivotal event in American history. It not only secured for the CIO recognition at GM, which was the world's largest corporation and a cornerstone of the "open shop" movement; it also gave tremendous impetus to the federation's efforts elsewhere in industrial America. As Loomis is very keen to emphasize, the outcome of that strike owed a great deal to Michigan Governor Frank Murphy, a humane and liberal man who refused to use state forces to evict the strikers, and to Franklin Roosevelt and his Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, who declined to condemn the strikers and abetted the negotiations that finally brought the strike to an end on favorable terms. For Loomis, these were the fruits of the CIO's effective support for New Deal politicians in the elections that preceded the strike and offer indelible proof of the enduring value of this kind of alliance.

But if the GM Strike and the events surrounding it are central to Loomis's argument about labor's need to engage with mainstream, liberal politics, they are also an essential occasion to raise questions about that argument's foundations and its implications. It is possible, for instance, to ask whether the outcome of that dispute was that much of a success to start with, if weighed against the aspirations of many of the men and women who participated in it.

To his credit, Loomis describes the outcome of the GM Strike as something contingent on what the strikers' themselves would manage to build from it in the years and months ahead; and he also acknowledges the role of Communists and other leftists in this strike and in the CIO's other great campaigns in this period. But what Loomis only hints at is the degree to which these strikers, and at least some elements of the CIO more generally, might legitimately have expected a great deal more than the likes of Murphy or Roosevelt were ever willing to concede.

Class Struggle and the Barren Marriage

Nor does the book, which takes pains to recognize the labor movement's shortcomings on race and gender, follow many other researchers—Mike Goldfield, with his recent book, *The Southern Key*, is a good example—in documenting the manifold tragedies that followed the purge of these leftists from the CIO and the active destruction of labor radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s. To say this is to highlight something more fundamental about the costs that inhere in labor's support for liberal politicians, which is the way this arrangement has produced what Mike Davis famously calls a "barren marriage" in which even labor's more modest aspirations must consistently yield to liberalism's inviolate commitments to property, order, and other preconditions of modern capitalism.

Nevertheless, if Loomis and Chomsky are serious about their embrace of "class struggle" as a framework for understanding labor's situation, one imagines that they should more readily perceive that class struggle means class conflict, and that in an organization like the Democratic Party, which even in the New Deal period was home to powerful capitalist interests, and which today is dominated by such interests, this kind of conflict is bound to end with labor giving much more than it gets.

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Not everyone who writes and thinks about labor history is destined be a radical, of course, let alone to be judged from that vantage. Nevertheless, precisely because Loomis and Chomsky are serious about their embrace of "class struggle" as a framework for understanding labor's situation, it seems they might more readily perceive that class struggle means class conflict, and should recognize that in an organization like the Democratic Party, which even in the New Deal period was home to powerful capitalist interests, and which today is dominated by such interests, this kind of conflict is bound to end with labor giving much more than it gets.

Of course Loomis, like Chomsky, doesn't pretend that the Democratic Party ever was free of the kinds of conflict that tend to frustrate labor's ambitions. But in his reading of labor history, Loomis frames this issue in a peculiar way, one that does much to absolve liberals of their complicity in labor's frustrations and decline. While Loomis's book aptly describes how the CIO, along with the labor movement more broadly, lost momentum in the years that followed the GM Strike, it presents this, not merely as a reflection of labor's inherent subordination to capital, but as the result of labor's failure to successfully navigate a more varied and changing political landscape. As conservatives regained the initiative in national politics, as labor militancy exploded in an enormous postwar strike wave, and as the CIO

attempted to extend its organizing successes to the South and other more conservative parts of the country, the movement inevitably floundered.

This is all true enough. The labor movement made enormous political mistakes and nothing in Loomis's formula for effective political engagement presupposes that this approach must be easy. Nevertheless, to believe that such engagement was ever particularly viable at all requires that one discount how tentative was the support for the sit-down strikers and the CIO among New Dealers from the outset, how ready many New Dealers and liberals of all stripes were to rein in labor even before the GM Strike had run its course, and how certain the labor movement was to run afoul of many of its erstwhile allies even without striking too much or trying to take its program to the South or West. Here, it is useful to consider the course of the tragic Little Steel Strike, which emerged from the CIO's attempts to organize the basic steel industry.

Little Steel and the Limits of the Alliance

Loomis briefly tell the story of the strike, which began just three months after the GM Strike ended. Graciously citing my own book about this affair, he describes how it collapsed in failure, done-in by company-sponsored violence, which claimed the lives of at least sixteen workers and left hundreds injured, and by the indifference of New Dealers. Indeed, he recounts the occasion, at the height of that tumultuous struggle, when Roosevelt shocked the ranks of CIO unionists who had anchored his landslide victory in the 1936 elections by declaring the strike "a plague on both your houses." But what Loomis doesn't do is explain why, if Roosevelt was such a friend of labor, he washed his hands of the strike, or describe the extent of the betrayal the strikers faced at the hands of other liberal politicians.

Strikers at Maytag plant, July 1938, forced back to work at the point of bayonet by

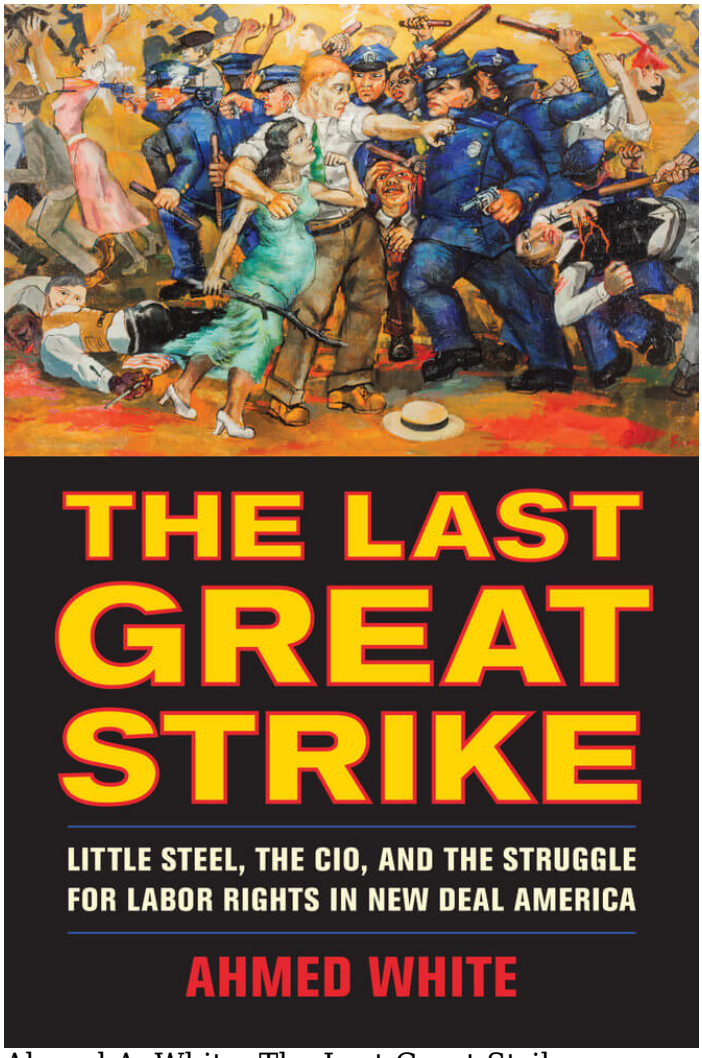
Governor Krashel. Krashel, a Democrat, called out the Iowa National Guard to counter the CIO's Labor Board hearings. Credit: Rosemary Feurer, University of Pittsburgh.

All over the strike zone, which extended across seven states in the Northeast and Great Lakes regions, New Deal governors and mayors ultimately conspired with company officials to undermine the workers' struggle. Significantly, when they did so, they invoked the same canards that today's liberals do when they turn on labor, pleading the need to keep the peace, the importance of preserving jobs, the limitations of their authority under the law, and the unimpeachable rights of capital. Compromise was the watchword, but in the Little Steel Strike it meant that the companies surrendered almost nothing and that strikers had to give up the fight and go back work for employers that had driven them to the picket lines by flagrantly violating the Wagner Act—the law whose enactment represented the high-water mark of liberal politicians' endorsement of labor rights. The logic behind this position was perhaps best memorialized by Ohio Governor Martin Davey, a New Dealer who justified his redeployment of several thousand National Guardsmen to push aside mass picketers and oversee the reopening of mills in that state with the dictum that "The right to work is sacred. The right to strike is equally valid."

In fact, if the GM Strike can be invoked to confirm the possibilities that inhere in labor's alliance with liberals, the Little Steel Strike serves just as readily as a refutation of those possibilities. Sit-down strikes were never typical. But strikes like Little Steel, in which workers rely mainly on a withholding of their labor to bring employer to heel, have always been. With sobering regularity, though, these strikes have ended in failure, as the other factors that doomed the CIO's walkout at Little Steel—the essential weakness of the right to strike in the context of the economic disparity between labor and capital and a legal and political system firmly committed to social order and the rights of property—undermine even the best-organized and most righteous of struggles. When they have resorted, like the Little Steel Strikers, to militant tactics like mass picketing, sympathy strikes, and other forms of coercion to make their protests effective, workers have either lost the support of liberals, or provided those liberals who never really supported them anyway with an effective way to justify this position.

Moreover, it was not only in the political realm that the fortunes of the CIO and the labor movement deteriorated in the wake of the GM Strike, but also in the domains of law and formal labor policy. As scholars like Harry Millis and Emily Clark Brown, James Gross, and Chris Tomlins have documented, long before the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act amended the Wagner Act to make it explicitly less favorable to labor, the courts and the National Labor Relations Board had already instituted many of these same anti-labor reforms. While pressure from conservatives was crucial, these changes enjoyed plenty of support from

liberals, sometimes explicitly, sometimes tacitly. And while every kind of pretext was used to justify this campaign, no single episode served this purpose as frequently or as effectively as the very event that Loomis and Chomsky rely most upon to prove how well liberal politicians respond to labor militancy: the GM Sit-Down Strike



Ahmed A. White, The Last Great Strike
(University of California)

Loomis notes that in 1939 the Supreme Court invalidated the sit-down strikes. But he says little about how, even before that case was decided, the GM Strike was being used, along with the Little Steel Strike and other episodes of labor militancy, to justify a series of judicial and administrative cases and state legislation that curtailed picketing rights and limited labor militancy. Nor does he say how these struggles were used to justify a sustained political attack on the NLRB that resulted in a purge of leftists from the agency,

as well as a dramatic restructuring that left it considerably less effective in administering the law. Missing from this story, too, is the role that that GM Strike played in the 1943 Supreme Court ruling called *Southern Steamship v. NLRB*, which essentially declared workers' rights under the Wagner Act subordinate to every other federal law or policy.

In the meantime, in a revealing display of how little the Wagner Act meant even before the statute and the NLRB were pushed to the right, the unfair labor practice cases the CIO filed on behalf of the Little Steel strikers under the Wagner Act ended with the companies paying only modest penalties for their outrageous and widespread violations of workers' rights. Thousands of workers who were illegally thrown out of work for months or years because they stood with the union got nothing or next to nothing in compensation. The companies continued to flout their obligations under the Wagner Act to bargain with and recognize the union until a new wartime political economy finally made it worth their while to do differently. And efforts in Congress to reform the law and make it more effective in the future went nowhere, doomed by the indifference of President Roosevelt and all but a handful of liberals in Congress.

As Loomis recognizes, the New Deal had already died on the vine before America's entry into the Second World War. But again, many of these developments regarding labor occurred before that. They all unfolded with Democrats in the White House and, though much of this period, with their party still in substantial control of Congress and wielding significant influence in state and local government. More importantly, they occurred with the labor movement now, by virtue of the very thing that Loomis and Chomsky are so eager to celebrate—the consummation of a political alliance between labor and the Democratic Party—increasingly hesitant to resort to illegal or semi-legal tactics like sit-down-strikes and mass picketing, and increasingly reliant on the labor law, the NLRB, and other institutions that were now being turned against its members.

Liberals and Neoliberals from Taft-Hartley to the Present

For many leftist students of labor history, these same observations about the unequal and dysfunctional dealings between labor and liberals inform a great skepticism about the merits of conventional political activism and a belief in the need for a labor radicalism that remains independent of mainstream politics and the state. For Loomis, though, they serve a different purpose. Although his book evidences a very commendable respect for radicals, the only radicalism that ultimately seems to make any sense for him is that which somehow contemplates working in concert with liberal politicians to mobilize the reformist functions of the state.

This is not the place for a comprehensive review of Loomis's book, which is, again, a significant and welcome contribution. Nor is this the place for a recounting of all the times that liberals' support for workers has proved fleeting, unreliable, or destructive. But in bringing this essay to a close, it is useful to do something that Loomis's book does not, which is to highlight some more recent examples that raise further questions about whether liberal reformism is a worthy undertaking, even by its own terms. Taft-Hartley was never repealed, despite the labor movement's strident efforts to secure this by working with liberals and Democrats, and despite many promises from these politicians that this would happen. In fact, no significant, pro-worker reforms of the labor law have been enacted since the Wagner Act, even though Democrats have often been in control of both the White House and Congress. Such was the case, for instance, with the defeat of labor reform legislation during the Carter Administration, of legislation to limit the use of replacement workers during Bill Clinton's first term, and of the Employee Free Choice Act during Barak Obama's first term.

Unions pressed hard for all of these initiatives, and received assurances that their support for Democrats would be rewarded accordingly. But in every one of these cases what they got were excuses from presidents and party leaders in Congress who justified themselves with much of the same rhetoric about compromise that their predecessors had employed decades earlier when they barred picketing, sent police and Guardsmen to reopen struck plants, or for that matter, came around to condemning sit-down strikes.

None of this is to suggest that electoral politics make no difference at all to the fortunes of the labor movement and the working men and women who comprise it. As bad as labor's plight has been for all of the past five decades, it has been generally worse when Republicans wielded more power. Nor is it obvious that, on balance, it doesn't make more sense to vote for Democrats over Republicans. As Loomis suggests, how one approaches that issue has as much to do with one's faith in the American political system as it does one's judgments about the political position of labor.

But if political choices are to be debated in any meaningful way, this has to involve more than a reflection on the possibilities that are immediately at hand to the exclusion of any serious thought about what might be achieved by more ambitious methods over a longer term. In this light it is appropriate to ask where labor would be today if the movement and its supporters had never allied so strongly with liberals or Democrats. The history of labor struggles seems to demand this at least as much as it counsels support for a party that has never been a reliable ally of the labor movement, let alone for a man like Joe Biden, who hardly occupies its left wing.

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