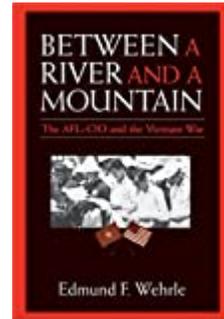




**Edmund F. Wehrle.** *Between a River and a Mountain: The AFL-CIO and the Vietnam War.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005. viii + 304 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-09900-9; \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-472-06900-2.



**Reviewed by** David Kieran (American Studies Department, George Washington University)

**Published on** H-1960s (January, 2007)

### **Big Labor's "Faustian Bargain" in Vietnam**

Many scholars and students of America's war with Vietnam understand it as having been, in the words of Christian Appy, a "working-class war." [1] However, one of the best-known home front confrontations of that war was the 1970 clash between peace protesters and pro-war "hard hats." That members of one of the groups being called in great numbers to fight the war would also fight those protesting it reveals a tension in working-class attitudes towards the Vietnam War. Given this tension and the significant role that blue-collar workers played in relation to the war it is surprising that the intersection of the Vietnam War and the labor movement has heretofore not been the subject of a significant, book-length study. Edmund F. Wehrle makes a considerable contribution toward filling this gap with his exhaustively researched *Between a River and a Mountain: The AFL-CIO and the Vietnam War*.

Wehrle makes a significant intervention into both labor history and the history of American foreign policy by arguing that "in several decades of bitter opposition to communism in Southeast Asia and support for the American War, the AFL-CIO helped shape the contours of U.S.

involvement in Vietnam—and the war in turn reshaped the American labor movement" (p. 2). Wehrle traces this relationship, arguing that the AFL-CIO's Vietnam policies, which required that the union compromise its ideology of Free Trade Unionism and continue supporting cold-war-era anticommunism despite both the risks that that policy posed to the chief constituents of labor unions (blue-collar workers) and the evolving attitudes of other liberals, largely discredited the labor movement. Between 1964 and 1975, big labor lost both internal and external support as labor leaders, union members, and the New Left increasingly turned against the war and those who supported it. During the same period, the Vietnamese labor movement's struggle for political legitimacy was marred by its dependence on support from both the AFL and the U.S. government.

Reflecting some of the best recent thinking about American foreign policy towards Vietnam, Wehrle's first two chapters illuminate the degree to which organized labor's interest in Indochina began almost immediately after the Second World War and was a central component of the AFL's Free Trade Unionism. Wehrle traces

Free Trade Unionism's roots to the early twentieth century, when labor leaders like Samuel Gompers maintained that independent trade unions were necessary to protect workers and prevent the spread of communism, which relied in part on state-sponsored labor unions. By the late 1930s, both the AFL and the CIO were anticommunist and sought to export these ideals. This ideology, which called for autonomous unions, anticommunism, and full employment economics based on large-scale government spending to stimulate the economy, became fully articulated as Free Trade Unionism after the Second World War.

This ideology also called for greater internationalism predicated on the belief that spreading democracy, and Free Trade Unionism, would benefit workers worldwide. Significantly, Free Trade Unionism became official policy just as organized labor began to offer an alternative to both French colonialism and revolutionary communism for Vietnamese workers who sought relief from oppression. Wehrle argues that this tension made Vietnam particularly interesting among the many countries where the AFL, which was now controlled entirely by cold warriors like George Meany, sought to develop organized labor. In concert with the International Coalition of Free Trade Unions, which it helped to organize, and the CIA, which provided financial support, the AFL began promoting labor activism in Vietnam. It is in this alliance with the U.S. government that Wehrle locates the seeds of the AFL-CIO's decline, arguing that although the development of unions in Indochina required federal funds, taking the money undermined both the principles of Free Trade Unionism and the credibility of those who espoused it. Despite occasionally getting mired in details to the detriment of his larger point and not fully developing comparisons between labor's interest and activities in Indochina to its programs in Africa and Latin America, Wehrle sets the stage well for his subsequent examination of the labor movement's relationship to Vietnam during the sixties and the seventies by drawing together the history of labor organizing in the United States and Vietnam and reminding us that Americans became conscious of Indochina as a crucial front in the cold war long before American troops were sent to Vietnam.

Wehrle next discusses the tumult of the Eisenhower years. The AFL merged with the CIO in 1955 largely on the terms of Free Trade Unionists. However, tension remained about organized labor's approach to communism, as labor leaders like former CIO chairman Walter Reuther criticized the hard-line anticommunism of Meany and the AFL leadership. On another front, the Eisenhower

administration dismantled labor-friendly New Deal policies and refused to fund "guns and butter" programs that combined military spending and foreign aid and which the AFL-CIO believed would promote democracy abroad and economic development at home. Meanwhile, the emerging Vietnamese Confederation of Labor (CVT) forged an uneasy partnership with Diem until the president cut ties because of fears that strong unions would threaten his tenuous grip on power. Left without support from the South Vietnamese government, the CVT looked to U.S. labor unions and the U.S. government for financial support. CVT leaders thus faced the same paradox that dogged the AFL-CIO—practically, CVT programs needed the money and expertise that American labor and the U.S. government could provide, but such partnerships undermined the autonomy at the center of CVT ideology.

The most fascinating part of Wehrle's argument, and the one that makes the greatest contribution to Vietnam War scholarship, are the six chapters that detail the AFL-CIO's dealings with three presidential administrations and the CVT. Wehrle is at his best in his discussion of labor's complex relationships with Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, and he ably shows how both the AFL-CIO and each president benefited and suffered as a result of the partnership. Free Trade Unionism fit well with Kennedy's "New Frontier," and the president enabled labor to pursue the development of "labor universities" in Africa and Central America with USAID funds. However, the AFL-CIO's partnership with the U.S. government also made public labor's contradiction of Free Trade Unionism, a problem that Meany and his colleagues had difficulty explaining away.

More than Kennedy, Johnson proved a strong ally of labor's goals both at home and abroad, and Wehrle bases his claim that "the years between 1965 and 1968 in many ways marked the apex of postwar American labor" (p. 101) in large part on a well-documented account of Johnson's transformation from having had a chilly relationship with labor as a senator to embracing the goals of Free Trade Unionism in the Great Society programs and proclaiming that success in Vietnam depended as much on the success of organized labor as it did on the success of the military. Wehrle carefully documents the close relationships and parallel goals of Johnson and the AFL-CIO, and he explains how the AFL-CIO-led nation-building programs in the third world, and particularly in Vietnam, served the foreign policy goals of the administration.

Wehrle is most illuminating as he teases out the tensions inherent in this partnership and the problems that

it caused for the AFL-CIO, the CVT, and Johnson. At home, the antiwar movement, including a growing antiwar coalition within labor unions, and the growing impossibility of reconciling labor's partnership with the government and the ideals of Free Trade Unionism, signaled the first tremors in a shift that would ultimately destroy the political capital of the AFL-CIO. Beginning as early as 1965, Wehrle argues, labor began to break along generational and cultural lines, and the hard-line anticommunism of Meany and the AFL old guard was increasingly challenged by smaller, local unions and the old leadership of the CIO, particularly Walter Reuther, who had always taken a softer approach to communism but had been heretofore shouted down by Meany. However, this division did not lead to a wholesale schism in the labor union, and Wehrle's nuanced analysis demonstrates how the antiwar elements in the labor union were alienated from both the more hawkish elements in labor and the rest of the antiwar movement, which was typically made up of people whose age, class, education, and values were frequently at odds with those of most union members. By 1968, labor found that it faced not only increasing international divisions but also increased marginalization in American culture.

Labor's support for the CVT might have been more palatable to the rank and file had that support succeeded, but Wehrle demonstrates that labor's efforts faltered largely because "U.S. officials were stuck with an ally of questionable competence that both needed and resented American support" (p. 105). The CVT's awkward position was not dissimilar to the AFL-CIO's. CVT leaders could maintain *doan the*, the Vietnamese belief in autonomy on which the labor movement was based, by refusing outside assistance, but doing so would leave the union weak and susceptible to Viet Cong infiltration. Conversely, accepting the aid would strengthen the union but would also give the appearance of having forsaken *doan the* and likely alienate the workers that the CVT sought to recruit. These two unsatisfying and potentially destructive options amounted to being caught "between a river and a mountain," as one Vietnamese labor leader put it (p. 4).

Johnson likewise found himself trapped between undesirable options. Wehrle convincingly demonstrates the degree to which labor's support for the war had broad political ramifications, and he makes a key intervention into discussions of why Johnson refused to change his policies prior to the 1968 election by arguing that "the anticommunist Left, and organized labor in particular, also may have influenced a president determined to preserve

a delicate liberal coalition" (p. 115). Johnson's attempts to maintain the hard-won support of labor unions made it impossible for him to change course on Vietnam, ultimately costing him the support of antiwar liberals and forcing not only his withdrawal from the race but also the very fracturing of the Left that he had sought to avoid.

Labor's involvement in the 1968 presidential election reflected its growing problems. Meany and the Free Trade Unionists endorsed Hubert Humphrey even before he had entered the race, believing that he would continue Johnson's policies. Wehrle suggests, however, that this support proved more of a blessing than a curse for Humphrey, who, like Johnson before him, refused to shift his Vietnam policies, thus sacrificing broader support for fear of losing labor's endorsement. Other labor leaders, like Walter Reuther, advocated a softer line on anticommunism, and sought an antiwar liberal; many supported Robert Kennedy until his assassination. Meanwhile, some blue-collar workers, feeling alienated and threatened by the civil rights movement, turned to George Wallace. Here, Wehrle does a fine job of mapping organized labor's fragmentation onto the larger decline of American liberalism by demonstrating how the last of the New Dealers and Free Trade Unionists, who advocated full employment economics and "guns and butter" foreign policy, were increasingly isolated from and challenged by both the New Left, which saw military spending as money that could be better spent on social programs, and Nixon's silent majority, who were disenchanted with liberalism of any kind.

Nonetheless, these chapters have flaws that bear mentioning because they point to a larger omission in the book. Wehrle's focus on the AFL-CIO leadership often renders silent those most affected by its policies—the blue-collar workers who were union members. While the book by intent examines the labor movement's relationship to the war through its leadership, the rare moments when Wehrle does attend to the subjectivity of blue-collar workers—such as his comment that "a host of cultural, social, and racial issues left many workers resentful, angry, and alienated" (p. 160)—signals an interesting but unelaborated dimension of this story. More problematic is the omission of any significant discussion of race. Here again, Wehrle gestures towards this issue but does not elaborate, as when he mentions that "Wallace's appeal clearly sprang from his opposition to civil rights reform, an increasingly touchy issue for organized labor" (p. 137). While the racial politics of labor unions could fill a book of its own, more attention to labor leaders' responses to civil rights and the racial dimensions of

the war would strengthen *Between a River and a Mountain*. Discussing the politics of class and labor during the Vietnam War without taking up this issue constitutes a glaring omission.

If the U.S. labor movement increasingly found itself on shaky ground in the late 1960s, Vietnamese labor faced far worse problems. The creation of a USAID-sponsored Labor Institute in South Vietnam undermined the autonomy of both the U.S. and the Vietnamese labor movements and ultimately did more political harm than practical good. The AFL-CIO continued to struggle with maintaining a façade of autonomy despite publicly taking USAID funds and found itself running out of viable options for supporting the development of South Vietnamese labor without compromising the CVT's autonomy by funding the Institute or fueling antiwar sentiment at home by criticizing the South Vietnamese government. For Vietnamese labor leaders, the consequences were more dire. Despite recognizing the need for American financial support, Tran Quoc Buu, Meany's counterpart in the CVT, remained fearful of appearing the lackey of foreigners. More frustrating than a potential loss of face was the CVT's failure to accomplish any meaningful domestic reform. South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu proved an unreliable ally. Although he formed the Lien Minh, a coalition that aimed to organize the more than 100 political organizations in South Vietnam, including the CVT, the organization failed miserably because its façade of neutrality was undermined by the presence of many politicians in leadership positions. More troubling, violence plagued the CVT's attempts to organize; the South Vietnamese police force brutally repressed a series of strikes in 1968, and the Viet Cong executed labor leaders during the Tet Offensive.

Wehrle argues that labor's continuing support for the war and the CVT led to its near complete political isolation by the end of the War. The problems that the AFL-CIO faced by 1968 worsened in the 1970s. Nixon sought organized labor's support of his war policies and succeeded somewhat with his "Blue-Collar Strategy." However, labor unions criticized his economic policies, and the antiwar movement both within organized labor and on the Left as a whole attacked the AFL-CIO leadership's support of Nixon's foreign policy. Although Wehrle's claim that labor's support for the war was based on more than myopic anticommunism is born out by the complexities that he dissects in the preceding chapters, his post-1972 portrait of George Meany presents an out-of-touch stalwart incapable of adapting to political reality.

Meany's continuing support for Nixon, anticommunism, and Free Trade Unionism during the 1972 election and his lobbying for congressional appropriations for Vietnam as late as 1975 left him largely isolated from both union members—almost all of whom were significantly younger than the leadership—and the remnants of the New Left. Just how far labor's leadership had shifted is perhaps best demonstrated in Wehrle's observation that many advisors to George Meany, who had had weekly phone conferences with Johnson, later worked in the Reagan administration.

As it had been all along, the CVT faced divisions parallel to those challenging the AFL-CIO but suffered more devastating effects. The 1973 withdrawal of U.S. troops and the end of foreign aid crippled the Vietnamese economy, led to widespread unemployment, and was the death knell for the CVT. Vietnamese workers increasingly turned to the Viet Cong, who had made land redistribution a key plank in its platform. Despite the lobbying of South Vietnamese President Thieu by Meany and the lobbying of Gerald Ford by Buu, domestic and foreign support for organized labor in Vietnam had dried up. During the fall of Saigon, American diplomats scrambled to evacuate labor leaders while the Viet Cong, reprising some of the destruction of the Tet Offensive, destroyed CVT offices and executed those union leaders who had not managed to flee the country. For his part, Meany remained "an unreconstructed anticommunist" (p. 194), and Wehrle argues that Meany's refusal to shift his views even in the face of defeat has had lingering effects on the labor movement in the United States.

*Between a River and a Mountain* is ultimately compelling in its argument that "the Vietnam War more than any other factor laid bare the contradictions and paradoxes in which labor operated in the second half of the twentieth century" (p. 199). However, two minor critiques bear mentioning. The first—and this may be a picayune point—is that the level of detail that is one of the book's greatest strengths is at times a liability, as the text's heavy reliance on acronyms likewise sometimes impedes clarity (e.g., in parentheticals like "the IFTCU [the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions] â; not to be confused with the ICFTU [the International Coalition of Free Trade Unions]" [p. 53]). The book would benefit from a glossary of abbreviations. However, this is a relatively minor concern, and the book moves quickly and is quite accessible.

Secondly, readers should heed Wehrle warning that his book is not "a dual history AFL-CIO and the CVT"

(p. 7), a point he makes in part because there is little surviving documentation of the CVT. Although any discussion of the labor movement in Vietnam makes an intervention into scholarship about the war, this lack renders the sections that deal with the CVT relatively dry and sometimes repetitive, especially compared to his richly detailed and nuanced treatment of American labor. Here again, this is minor criticism, for Wehrle's demonstration that the emergence of labor unions and the problems inherent in the paradoxical reality that enacting the ideals of Free Trade Unionism necessitated alliances that undercut that very ideology were not unique to the AFL-CIO is sound, and *Between a River and a Mountain's* real strength is the degree to which it casts the development

of organized labor in transnational terms.

Despite these minor criticisms, *Between a River and a Mountain* is an important book. It is authoritatively researched, well written, and convincing. In writing this book, Edmund F. Wehrle has made a significant contribution towards a broader understanding of the labor movement in the United States, the transnational dimensions of U.S. labor, and the cultural impact of the Vietnam War.

Note

[1]. Christian G. Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-1960s>

**Citation:** David Kieran. Review of Wehrle, Edmund F., *Between a River and a Mountain: The AFL-CIO and the Vietnam War*. H-1960s, H-Net Reviews. January, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12739>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).