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Review of How to Keep Union Records

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Review of *How to Keep Union Records*

By Michael Nash, ed. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2010.
228 pp. Soft cover. \$49.00. ISBN 1-931666-35-0

Every now and again when I am teaching my American history classes, I will begin on a Monday by asking if my students enjoyed their weekend. When they say “yes,” I tell them they can thank the labor movement for that – and the eight hour day, minimum wage rates, benefits, etc. For many archivists and manuscripts curators, however, (though they may also enjoy some of the above named benefits as well) the larger challenge is documenting the past, present and future of labor history. This excellent collection of ten essays constitutes a valuable reference work for those who already have union records, and for those thinking about going after them.

Building on the work of Debra Bernhardt, Nash, director of NYU’s Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, brings together a knowledgeable group of archivists and curators who are well versed in the subject. The chapters examine everything from the usual questions of appraisal, arrangement and reference, to other topics specifically and particularly tied to unions and union records. Two of the most important, especially for those just beginning to acquire union records are Nash’s “Labor History and Archival Management,” and Pamela Hackbart-Dean’s “Unions and Labor Archives.”

As Nash notes, the “complex relationship between historical writing and archival practice” (p. 1) has been especially true for labor history since both developed around the same time. Accordingly, each benefitted from changes in the historiography of labor in the United States. Initially a group of Progressive era scholars – Richard Ely, John R. Commons and Selig Pearlman – relied on union records to write their studies which emphasized “institutional history,” the story of labor unions and their leaders, rather than that of working people and social movements broadly. This approach dominated into the 1960s when a group of younger scholars “reconceptualized labor history as the social history of working people.” (p. 3) Part of the many “new” historiographic approaches of the time, these scholars, among other things, sought to “restore the idea of class and conflict between labor and capital.” (p. 5) Their efforts inspired a succeeding group of scholars who tested these assumptions at the micro level, while ultimately broadening the approach to include race and gender, and relying on primary labor/working class sources for their analysis. Simultaneously, archivists themselves increasingly sought to better document working class experiences as a way of not only aiding scholars, but responding to the informational needs of unions and others as well.

In her excellent article “Unions and Labor Archives,” Hackbart-Dean identifies the “overlapping roles,” and the development of “good and trusting relationships” (p. 17) with unions that is vital to building strong labor collections. While the needs of both the unions and the repository are many, one of the most significant is demonstrating that the proper care of union records will provide a “historical memory” of union actions that can not only “preserve the evidence of past decisions,” (p. 18) but inform present and future efforts as well. Beyond these practical suggestions the author also discusses how several important repositories and unions have worked together to document working class culture and experiences.

Obviously much of what is said in these excellent essays is germane not just to building labor collections, but to archives generally, as well as to similar approaches seeking to document other social, political, cultural and economic movements. In addition to the technical, theoretical and practical advice found in each of the essays, the book also contains an excellent and useful directory of labor/working class collections from throughout the country. As one whose own scholarship and teaching has drawn closely from the broad tradition of working class activity, I hope that archivists in the future maintain a commitment to documenting this rich story as well. Finally, a small, but not insignificant, point: it was nice to see the “union bug” printed on the inside front cover!

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