



REVIEW

John Barnard,
American Vanguard:
A History of the United Auto Workers,
1935–1970.

Daniel J. Clark

Since retiring in 1997 after 33 years as Oakland University's labor history specialist, Jack Barnard has been busy revising and polishing a major manuscript, *American Vanguard: A History of the United Auto Workers, 1935–1970*, soon to be published by Wayne State University Press. Books and articles have been written about former UAW President Walter Reuther (including one by Barnard), factional battles within the UAW leadership (particularly in the 1930s and 1940s), the role of race in the union's history, women's struggles within the union, the UAW's impact on national politics, and episodes of labor conflict, but until now there has been no history of the UAW that synthesizes and expands upon these narrower investigations. Jack Barnard's book successfully accomplishes this task, displaying mastery of the existing literature on this important union. Barnard also utilizes significant additional research, especially oral history interviews with prominent UAW officials,

some of which he conducted himself, and others that were collected in the 1960s and 1970s by earlier scholars.

Among those who write about the UAW, passions are often powerful, and attempting a synthesis like this might be the academic equivalent of volunteering to cross a minefield. Labor historians tend to be harshly critical of the UAW—for failing to do more to promote racial and gender equality within the union, for failing to create a Western European-style social democratic polity within the United States, for failing to counteract the unemployment caused by automation and job flight, and so on. Professor Barnard's clear prose and balanced judgments, however, should help focus debates on what the union actually did, what constraints the UAW leadership faced, and what was realistically possible in American politics in this era. Although Professor Barnard's account is, on the whole, sympathetic, it is hardly uncritical of union shortcomings and intra-union squabbling. Particularly impressive are his discussions of the role of Communists in the union's early years, and of the UAW's ambiguous legacy of officially promoting racial equality while often tolerating a very different in-plant reality.

As with many accounts of the UAW, in this book the union becomes, at times, almost identical with its longtime leader, Walter Reuther. Indeed, Barnard's study ends in 1970, the year that Reuther and his wife, May, died in a plane crash in northern Michigan. This emphasis is hard to escape, given the current state of scholarship. It is often difficult to dig beneath the top levels of UAW leadership because so little research has been done on the workers who made up the bulk of union membership. Barnard, however, does excellent work with the available scholarship. He treats UAW members as authentic people trying to make the most of their lives, not necessarily preoccupied with the issues preferred by many of their historians. Professor Barnard's work reminds us that although the UAW did not accomplish all that it might have and was far from perfect, in its first 35 years it substantially changed the lives of millions for the better.