



Labor's Home Front: The American Federation of Labor during World War II

By Andrew E. Kersten

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One of the oldest, strongest, and largest labor organizations in the U.S., the American Federation of Labor (AFL) had 4 million members in over 20,000 union locals during World War II. The AFL played a key role in wartime production and was a major actor in the contentious relationship between the state, organized labor, and the working class in the 1940s. The war years are pivotal in the history of American labor, but books on the AFL's experiences are scant, with far more on the radical Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO).

Andrew E. Kersten closes this gap with **Labor's Home Front**, challenging us to reconsider the AFL and its influence on twentieth-century history. Kersten details the union's contributions to wartime labor relations, its opposition to the open shop movement, divided support for fair employment and equity for women and African American workers, its constant battles with the CIO, and its significant efforts to reshape American society, economics, and politics after the war. Throughout, Kersten frames his narrative with an original, central theme: that despite its conservative nature, the AFL was dramatically transformed during World War II, becoming a more powerful progressive force that pushed for liberal change.

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- Sales Rank: #1056214 in Books
- Published on: 2009-03-01
- Released on: 2009-03-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.02" h x .65" w x 5.98" l, .90 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 288 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

“Kersten boldly goes where few historians have gone before—and it’s about time. . . . Zeroing in on significant issues including wartime labor relations, race and gender discrimination, and postwar planning, Kersten provides ample evidence of both change and continuity.”

-*Journal of American History*

“*Labor's Home Front* is the work of a careful and thorough historian. Kersten establishes the centrality of the often neglected American Federation of Labor to the story of labor's uphill efforts during World War II to breathe life into the lofty ideals embodied in the Four Freedoms. He skillfully weaves his case studies—on gender, race, union rivalries, safety, the open shop, and postwar planning—into a narrative fully attentive to the evolution of the Federation's ideology and politics, poignantly conveying the spirit of sacrifice and suffering without romanticizing his subjects. This is a genuinely important book.”

-Eric Arnesen, author of *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality*

“*Labor's Home Front* is an outstanding contribution. Balanced and fair-minded, Kersten’s richly documented account puts the AFL at the center of wartime labor relations and domestic history generally. . . . Kersten also sheds new light on the key role of the AFL in the emergence of social democratic liberalism during the era of World War II.”

-Robert H. Zieger, University of Florida

“Highlights a crucial time in the union movement’s history”

-*Labor Studies Journal*

“One often hears that labor history’s halcyon days have passed, but Kersten’s balanced and readable study provides a potent example for how the field might be revitalized.”

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American Historical Review

From the Publisher

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About the Author

Andrew Kersten is Dean of the College of Letters, Arts, and Social Sciences at the University of Idaho.

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