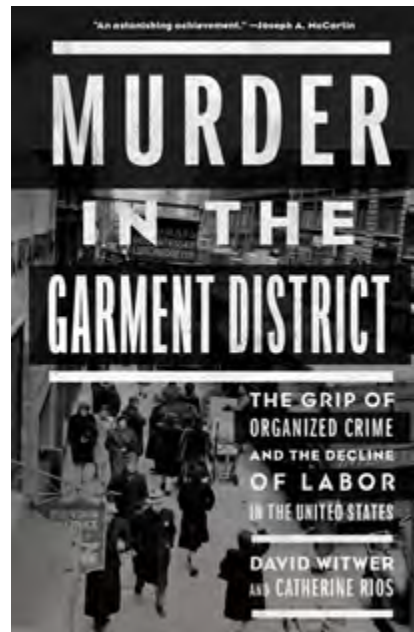


RACKETEERING, UNIONS AND THE LOSS OF PUBLIC TRUST

ROBERT JAQUAY



Murder in the Garment District: The Grip of Organized Crime and the Decline of Organized Labor in the United States by David Witwer and Catherine Rios. David Witwer was a Fulbright Bicentennial Chair in History at the University of Helsinki, Finland, in 2022.

Murder in the Garment District: The Grip of Organized Crime and the Decline of Organized Labor in the United States provides a challenging, yet rewarding read. The authors—David Witwer, a professor of history at Penn State Harrisburg, and Catherine Rios, a professor of communication there—offer shocking examples of mob violence upon unions occurring post-WW II along with vivid descriptions of urban, working-class neighborhoods from which both organized labor and organized crime arose, illustrating the infiltration of racketeers into originally high-minded labor unions, and explaining the moral compromises made by labor leaders in that era. All this became grist for courtroom trials, Congressional hearings, and damning media coverage from the late 1940s through the 1950s.

The genesis of the book's title is the brazen daylight stabbing that killed William Lurye, an organizer for the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union and married father of four, on the afternoon May 9, 1949. Lurye's assailants, connected to racketeers hired by garment shop owners to keep unions at bay, were not convicted due to witness intimidation and suspected

mob connections with local law enforcement. New York Mayor William O'Dwyer claimed he added police presence to make the Garment District safer, but garment worker leader Sasha Zimmerman retorted, "You sent the cops down and they arrested all our pickets" (26). Finding no recourse from law enforcement and the courts, exasperated labor leaders reluctantly concluded that continued existence of their unions required dealing with the same mobsters attacking them.

Witwer and Rios describe the spread of union racketeering in other New York industries beyond the garment district, such as "waterfront shipping, the produce and seafood markets, or waste hauling" (80) and in other cities, including Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, and Seattle. They then detail a series of newspaper and magazine exposés. Particular focus is given to the 1957 Congressional hearings conducted by the McClellan Committee, which created a widespread distrust of unions that, the authors assert, continues to this day.

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Yet the authors seem to suggest that William Lurye's brutal murder was the major catalyst for all subsequent events related in the following chapters and that union corruption is the primary cause for the sixty-year decline in membership and political power from its post-war peak. However, Lurye's death is but one compelling example of the violent means mobsters used to force their corrupt bargains with labor leaders. Scant mention is made of multiple factors that account for the decline of labor, such as globalization, technological change, passage of the Taft-Hartley Act, failure to organize workers in southern states. While organized crime infiltration is a lingering factor in decline of union strength since World War II, full explanation for the downward trend line is much more complex than the title conveys.

Nonetheless, *Murder in the Garment District: The Grip of Organized Crime and the Decline of Labor in the United States* is highly engaging and thought provoking. The fascinating depictions of its main personae and events ring true. This reviewer was reminded of Cleveland, Ohio, which, although not mentioned in the book, has neighborhoods populated by a similar cast of factory workers and truck haulers, shop owners, union leaders, mobsters, policemen, prosecutors, elected officials and news reporters with likewise complicated relationships their shared affinities engendered. The book also called to mind *The Plain Dealer* and *Cleveland Press* accounts of local car bombings, shootings, and fights to control labor as well as Cleveland-oriented works, such as James Neff's *Mobbed Up: Jackie Presser's High-Wire Life in the Teamsters, the Mafia and the FBI*; and Rick Porello's *To Kill the Irishman*, along with a slew of concrete measures to support working people proposed by the think tank Policy Matters Ohio.

Murder in the Garment District concludes with these lines: “The politically fatal link between the union movement and labor racketeering was cemented in the Cold War era of the McClellan Committee hearings. As long as this false notion remains uncorrected, the possibility of labor’s revival remains dim, and without that revival America’s continued slide down toward worsening inequality and working-class alienation seems destined to continue” (236). The authors explain how we entered this dark thicket, yet their historical perspective does not offer guidance for finding a forward path.

David Witwer and Catherine Rios, *Murder in the Garment District: The Grip of Organized Crime and the Decline of Organized Labor in the United States*. New York: The New Press, 2022. 289 pages. \$26.99.

BIOGRAPHY

Robert Jaquay was a 2016 Fulbright Specialist at the Coady International Institute of St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, Canada. He retired in 2021 after twenty-five years as Associate Director of the George Gund Foundation, a grant-making organization, in Cleveland, Ohio. Currently, he is senior fellow at the Levin College of Public Affairs and Education at Cleveland State University. He can be reached at books@fulbright-chronicles.com

