

spotlight

Workers' Rights Champion

The *New York Times* describes Reed Larson as one who "can mobilize a right-wing army of hundreds of thousands, make Presidents change their minds, and frustrate the best-laid plans of organized labor." Seemingly as an afterthought, in further testimony to his influence, the *Times* adds that "he even has his own zip code number."

As president of the National Right to Work Committee, Reed Larson, 56 years old, is the acknowledged leader in the fight against compulsory unionism and the closed shop. Twenty years ago Larson left a promising engineering position with a firm in Kansas to head the drive to pass that state's right-to-work initiative. As he jokingly remarks, "The campaign took a little longer than expected"—in a sense, it hasn't ended yet. After the initiative's passage Reed was appointed executive vice-president of the national committee, which was just being formed at the time.

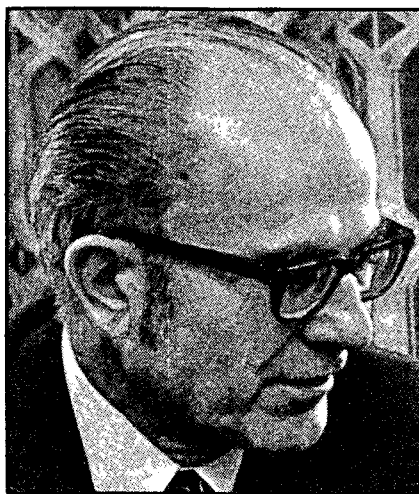
Under his guidance the organization has grown to a phenomenal 1.25 million members. In 1977 contributions totaled \$8.5 million, and 25 million letters were mailed at a cost of \$2 million for postage alone. While Larson is actively working to gain states' passage of right-to-work measures banning the closed union shop—20 states now have such provisions—he and the committee are also providing assistance to employees filing lawsuits against compulsory unionism, mounting an attack on public-employee unionism, investigating pro-union materials reaching public schools, placing ads in publications, and commissioning public opinion polls.

During the 95th Congress, Larson directed the legislative battles that brought the defeat of the common situs picketing bill (which would have allowed union picketing to shut down parts of a construction site in addition to those directly involving the union) and the labor law reform bill (which the Right to Work Committee says would have compelled "hundreds of thousands of additional employees into unwanted unions"). These defeats forced labor organizations—led by the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)—to temporarily forgo their attempt to repeal section 14(b) of the Taft-Hartley Act (which allows states to pass right-to-work measures). Larson accom-

plished this task through the coordination of massive letter-writing campaigns using the committee's tremendous membership.

Larson views the right-to-work issue as a philosophical one involving the issue of human rights. The national committee's stationery displays its position: "Americans must have the right but not be compelled to join labor unions." Reed says that his purpose is "not anti-union" but "to guarantee the freedom of employees." "Anyone who says voluntarism is anti-union," he declares, "is condemning unionism by saying it can only exist on compulsion."

He sees unions' charge that right-to-work laws allow "free riders"—those who benefit from union negotiations but do not have to pay their share of the costs—



Reed Larson

as "phony." People who are forced to join labor unions are "captive passengers," he says, and he is quick to point out that "many people are not helped" by unions. The most common complaint against unions is that they enforce a leveling out of the productivity of workers, and many workers "do not want to be saddled with a union agreement" that does not encourage—or even discourages—increased productivity.

One issue of special concern to Larson "is diversion of compulsory union dues into politics," because it forces individuals to assist political causes in which they do not believe. And some of the coercive powers of government, he maintains, are the result of unions using their political power to come down on the "side of more government."

But Larson is evasive when questioned whether he believes that "businesses should be free to choose to hire either union or nonunion employees." He counters that "we crossed the bridge many years ago with government intervention" and that we are no longer in a position to make that decision. He notes that "yellow dog contracts" (by which a worker promises not to join a union if he is hired by a company) were outlawed in 1935 and that the National Right to Work Committee has never taken a stand on that issue. While "one kind of yellow dog contract is banned," though, "another type of yellow dog contract forcing membership" is sanctioned. Yet when asked again about his own personal views on the subject, Larson says that he has "never thought about it."

Politically, Larson is "very suspicious of concentration of power against individual choice," and he believes that too much coercive power has been concentrated in the hands of the government. He does not associate the development of his political beliefs with any particular personal events but says that his views were primarily shaped by the family environment in which he was raised. In Kansas, where he grew up, he was actively involved in many different causes and served as president of the state's Junior Chamber of Commerce the year before he ran the effort to pass the right-to-work initiative.

In the coming year he is preparing to fight attempts to lower the number of senators needed to end a filibuster—the filibuster has been an extremely important instrument in preventing further increases in unions' power. Larson will also work on getting the legislatures in New Mexico, Idaho, Maine, Vermont, and Colorado to approve right-to-work legislation. Many times in the past, Reed Larson has performed a critical role in the defeat of union-backed legislation. In 1965 he persuaded Everett Dirksen of Illinois, the Senate Republican leader, to personally maneuver the filibuster against eliminating 14(b). In 1970, in keeping the post office from becoming a closed union shop, he won a major victory against the combined opposition of the Nixon administration, the Chamber of Commerce, and the AFL-CIO.

Reed Larson's activities at the National Right to Work Committee have caused problems for the unions. Whether he is fighting court battles or bills before state legislatures, the struggles take money and resources that labor unions would like to use in other ways. As one staff member for the AFL-CIO said, "Even when we win it, we lose it."

—John R. Lott

books

G. K. Chesterton: Radical Populist

By Margaret Canovan
New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
1977. 175 pp. \$10.95.

Reviewed by David Friedman

The great temptation in reviewing a book on Chesterton, as in writing one, is to simply assemble a string of quotations, tied together by a minimum of commentary. The only safe alternative would be to include no quotes at all. Margaret Canovan has had the courage to follow the middle course and consequently comes out of the book rather less well than her subject. Her examples of Chesterton's writing make her own attempts to defend him appear rather like Woody Allen volunteering his services to bodyguard Mohammed Ali. In truth, Chesterton needs no defense; whatever his faults, he is so good that anyone who deserves the pleasure of reading him will gladly forgive them. He resembles in this the other great political essayists of this century, H. L. Mencken and George Orwell; it was Orwell who, in an attack on the later Catholic apologists, described them as "the leavings on Chesterton's plate."

For Canovan, the central puzzle is how Chesterton could be at the same time a revolutionary and a defender of private property, a radical opponent of both the conservative ruling classes and their socialist adversaries. How could a man both good and intelligent not only fail to support measures such as national health insurance, state regulation, and child labor laws, but actively oppose them? How could it be that Chesterton, the most radical of Liberals, who had the courage to openly oppose British imperialism during the Boer War, broke with the Liberal Party not merely when, but explicitly *because*, it became "progressive"?

It is to her credit that Canovan does not dismiss Chesterton as merely a talented madman. She instead argues that he saw progressive legislation as a paternalistic and often self-interested attempt by a ruling elite to tell the masses what was good for them and to compel them to do it. She thus converts the dispute into a class conflict, with Chesterton defending the "good" lower class against the "evil" upper. Those are terms that she, and her modern English audience, can accept.

This description is correct as far as it

goes, but it makes Chesterton's position seem much narrower than it was. It is true that he wrote at length and with feeling about the class nature of paternalistic state action. But his point was not that such action would be desirable if the common people were behind it; it was, instead, that the people were not behind it precisely because it was not desirable. For Chesterton, what is wrong is taking away a man's freedom to run his own life; that it is taken away by a rich man who says he is doing it for the victim's good only adds insult to injury. That the rich man is, in practice, exempt from his own law is an additional injustice but also an explanation of why he supports it.

The narrowness of Canovan's interpretation makes her final chapter on Chesterton's relevance curiously flat. She ties him in with everything from Watergate to the Concorde and repeats the usual clichés concerning the ills of the modern world. What she fails to note is that, whether or not Britain and the United States are—as Chesterton believed that England was—class societies ruled by an elite, most of the specific tyrannies that Chesterton fought, including some of those that Canovan finds especially horrifying, still exist. Consider, for example, the Mental Deficiency Act, "which authorized any two doctors to identify any person or child as 'deficient' . . . and lock him up for life." As Chesterton pointed out, "If I want to dispossess a nephew, oust a rival, silence a blackmailer, or get rid of an importunate widow, there is nothing in logic to prevent my calling them feeble-minded too. And the vaguer the charge is the less they will be able to disprove it." If Miss Canovan is aware that in much of the United States a man can be committed on the word of two psychiatrists without having been convicted of any crime, and locked up until he succeeds in persuading his keepers that he is "cured," she does not mention it.

The same narrowness of interpretation leads to her main thesis—that Chesterton was a populist. She quotes Peter Wiles's identification of populism's major tenet as "Virtue resides in the simple people, who are the overwhelming majority, and in their collective traditions." She observes, correctly, that Chesterton believed the masses of the population were in favor of both liberty and common sense. But by implying that he was for those things *because* the people were for them, she, as she realizes, creates a serious problem for her interpretation. Chesterton's writing was

popular, but his views were not. His attempt at a political movement, the Distributist League, was a flop. If he held his views because they were the wisdom of the people, why did the people not support him? If the people did not support him, why did he not change his views?

Chesterton not only did not accept the identification of what is "right" with what is "popular"—he despised it. In *What's Wrong with the World* (1910) he wrote: "We often read nowadays of the valour or audacity with which some rebel attacks a hoary tyranny or an antiquated superstition. There is not really any courage at all in attacking hoary or antiquated things, any more than in offering to fight one's grandmother. The really courageous man is he who defies tyrannies young as the morning and superstitions fresh as the first flowers. The only true free-thinker is he whose intellect is as much free from the future as from the past. He cares as little for what will be as for what has been; he cares only for what ought to be."

If not a populist, what was he? "I am a Liberal. It is the other people who are not Liberals." And, "As much as I ever did, more than I ever did, I believe in Liberalism. But there was a rosy time of innocence when I believed in Liberals."

There was a time, long ago, when liberalism meant belief in individual liberty. Chesterton left the Liberal Party when it abandoned that belief in favor of what is now called liberalism—democratic socialism and water. In explaining his "paradoxical" opposition to both the status quo and socialism, he put the liberal case very simply. "I am one of those who believe that the cure for centralization is decentralization. It has been described as a paradox. There is apparently something elvish and fantastic about saying that when capital has come to be too much in the hands of the few, the right thing is to restore it into the hands of the many. The Socialist would put it in the hands of even fewer; but those people would be politicians, who (as we know) always administer it in the interests of the many."

The best way to understand Chesterton's political position is to look at the radical liberal movement that now calls itself libertarianism. One finds there not only the same opposition to increases in State power, under whatever guise, but also, at times, the same tendency to view government oppression as not only bad but deliberate, as the outcome of a conspiracy, explicit or implicit, among the political parties against the populace.