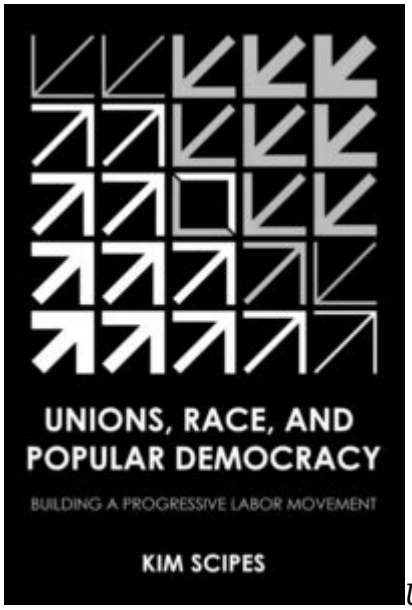
Can CIO Best Practices Aid New Union Organizing Now?

written by Steve Early | August 21, 2026



Unions, Race, and Popular Democracy: Building a Progressive Labor Movement, by Kim Scipes (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2026)

Industrial union building in the 1930s has long been the lodestar for the post-New Deal labor left. If organized labor in the U.S. could go from historic membership lows in the 1920s to an early 1950s peak union density of nearly one-third of all private sector workers, maybe that great leap forward could be repeated again, sometime in the future?

Other than the public sector worker upsurge of the late 1960s and 1970s—which has propped up (with less success over time) overall unionization rates ever since—there has been little sign yet of the second coming of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), in some 21st century form. Unless a union like my own, the Communications Workers of America (CWA), or the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), or the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) was able to neutralize management opposition, using bargaining leverage with a partially unionized employer, there have been few recent private sector organizing breakthroughs on a large scale, certainly not industry-wide ones.

Starbucks workers have won hundreds of National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) elections in small retail store units but, so far, have been thwarted in their effort to reach an acceptable national agreement covering thousands of workers. At Amazon, representation votes have been far harder to win; when bargaining rights have been won, union supporters face even longer first contract delays.

In their own struggle for collective bargaining, workers in basic industry in the 1930s also had to overcome past defeats and find new ways of organizing themselves to change the balance of power between themselves and giant corporations. In his new book, *Unions, Race, and Popular Democracy*, sociology professor Kim Scipes examines parallel efforts to build two CIO unions in the Midwest—via the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) and the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee. (PWOC).

The author is a long-time labor educator and faculty union member, as well as an academic researcher with many prior publications. He has devoted much of his career to mixing theory and practice and is adept at popularizing his findings and ideas to reach a non-academic audience.

In his detailed case studies, Scipes recounts the key role that rank-and-file activists played in the creation of what became the United Steel Workers of America (USWA) and United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA), respectively.

The book is full of valuable lessons for those hoping to have 21st century success in "developing an inclusive, rank-and-file based unionism guided by democratic decision making," rather than having full-time officials, far removed from the shop floor, exercise too much bureaucratic control.

Just like Depression-era radicals in the SWOC and PWOC, activists in present-day networks like the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee, co-sponsored by Democratic Socialists of America, have to navigate a labor landscape still overly dominated by the latter-type of labor organization.

Scipes' book includes a compelling indictment of the US labor movement's historic failures to resist racism and, in the case of some unions, their disgraceful record of discriminating against black workers and even white women as members.

He also provides much evidence that denying workers of color an equal voice in union affairs—where and when that was the case—ended up being self-defeating, because it reinforced the divide-and-conquer strategies of management and hampered efforts to raise working class living standards for all. The result was a steady "weakening of labor's power" and "white workers getting less themselves than they would have gotten had blacks and other peoples of color been included as equals…"

Among the book's many strengths is the author's understanding that rank-and-file militants can also be "marginalized" and deprived of "appropriate attention" in labor history because both academic researchers and authors of labor leader biographies have, in the past, focused too much on the role of top officials.

The author highlights the UPWA's exemplary record of developing black leadership in half of its founding locals "in racist, segregated Chicago," which will be very instructive for seekers of greater racial and gender diversity among elected local officers today.

Scipes' discussion of the UPWA's approach to membership education and political action, building alliances with non-labor groups, and fighting racial injustice on the job and in the community has great contemporary relevance and resonance. Modern day organizers face similar challenges to building unity between "white ethnics," African Americans, and recent immigrants from Latin America, the Middle East, and Haiti.

Unions, Race, and Popular Democracy very much follows in the footsteps of Toni Gilpin's *The Long Deep Grudge*, a history of the militant, racially integrated, and internally democratic Farm Equipment Workers, a left-led union similar to the Packinghouse Workers in its heyday.

The evolution of PWOC into a far more democratic and progressive union than the USWA—deeply committed to developing and elevating African American leadership long ago—will be of particular interest to union reformers now seeking to transform the United Food and Commercial Workers. That AFL-CIO affiliate, with 1.3 million members, is the conservative amalgamated union that UPWA eventually ended up in, via a series of mergers that much diluted its original organizational heritage and culture.

As Scipes suggests, if more unions today were like the original Packinghouse Workers, they might not have had such a hard time rallying their own members against the clear and present danger of right-wing, anti-union Republican control of Congress and the White House.

During three presidential election cycles, Donald Trump's Electoral College win in 2016 and popular vote victory two years ago exposed how the decline in union social and political influence and membership density in the rust belt has left too many working-class people overly receptive to MAGA appeals, based on "white supremacy" and immigrant bashing.

The "social justice unionism" that Scipes advocates as a better way forward, now as in the 1930s, definitely proved to be a buffer against fascism during the Great Depression. Readers of *Unions, Race, and Popular Democracy* will find it to be an important contribution to current discussions about how to create more militant, progressive unions through internal restructuring, democratization, and reform—or starting all over again with independent labor organizations outside the AFL-CIO.