



# **Labor in Maine: Building the Arsenal of Democracy and Resisting Reaction at Home, 1939- 1952**

*Charles A. Scontras*

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Labor In Maine: Building The Arsenal Of Democracy and Resisting Reaction at Home, 1939-1952, by Charles A. Scontras. Scontras is arguably the most prolific, the most important Maine historian of the late 20th and early 21st century. The 11 solid books to his credit fill a huge gap in the fabric of the state's history. Scontras is a fearless researcher who relies on union records, company documents, state records, personal records and newspaper accounts. This book is a big, beefy, thoroughly illuminating account of the home front as seen through the eyes of organized labor. This proves by no means a pretty, peaceable-brotherhood picture. The CIO and ALF, not to mention local unions, were going against one another at the outset. Indeed, the memory of the unsuccessful 1937 Lewiston-Auburn Shoe Strike, led by the CIO, was fresh in people's minds. If this were not bad enough, local businessmen and elements in rival labor organizations painted the left-leaning CIO as communist. The political climate in the state was unfavorable for labor interests. Margaret Chase Smith, with her progressive Republican values, was the only real friend labor could claim. In short, it was the right of the individual to be his own agent. The sudden appearance of more than 20,000 new jobs in South Portland's new shipyards caused huge social and economic problems. Because of federal contracts, the pay was very good compared to that of traditional local jobs. Rents were at a premium so the prices went sky-high. Established people began to see the new workers as a problem, "Shipyard trash." In fact, such men and women had taken difficult, dangerous jobs that needed training and concentration, a fact generally overlooked by most natives. This is a side of the World War II home front that was not much touted at the time and quickly forgotten after VJ-Day. To his credit, Scontras has followed the history of organized labor up to 1952, when membership reached between 90,000 and 95,000 out of a non-agrarian workforce of 250,000. As he notes, the climate had changed due to hard work. The author is strong on teamwork and tends to shy away from heroes, but certainly the names of Benjamin Dorsky and George Jabar stand out. Readers will also see the impact of women in the workplace and in power. Witness the extraordinary rise of Margaret Chase Smith, Lucia M. Cormier and Maine Labor Commissioner Marion Martin. Anyone really wishing to understand the history of our state needs to read this well-written book.

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