

## Power at Odds: the 1922 National Railroad Shopmen's Strike

ISSN 0003-4827

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### Recommended Citation

"Power at Odds: the 1922 National Railroad Shopmen's Strike." *The Annals of Iowa* 57 (1998), 300-302.

Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol57/iss3/19>

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In the two final sections, Britten wisely examines the impact of the war on the home front. He documents how liberty bond drives, Red Cross volunteer activities, expansion of reservation crop and ranching operations, and migration to cities for defense industry jobs affected the reservations. Unfortunately, these historical events were marred by the government's use of force and misinformation to attain its goals.

By focusing on the experiences of individuals on the battlefields and on the home front, Britten has captured the human side of the story. Indian residents of Iowa and surrounding midwestern states make their appearances in the book, but southwestern, northern plains, and Oklahoma tribes dominate the story because of their larger populations and greater numerical participation in the war. Britten well documents his contention that for American Indians "World War I was a catalyst for change" (186), and he reminds us that the Second World War would provide even greater impetus to the cycle of change.

*Power at Odds: The 1922 National Railroad Shopmen's Strike*, by Colin J. Davis. The Working Class in American History Series. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997. xii, 244 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, index. \$49.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY COLIN GORDON, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

The 1922 strike by railroad shopmen marks an important watershed in American labor history. In one sense, it was the last of the great nineteenth-century labor battles marked by state repression, craft unionism, and a fierce managerial defense of property rights. In another sense, it stood alongside the 1919 steel strike as the first salvo in the modern battle over bargaining rights, state arbitration, and welfare capitalism. Colin Davis's *Power at Odds* captures this moment and offers both a compelling narrative of the strike and a tightly argued analysis of the intersection of state, labor, and managerial power.

In the early chapters, Davis gives us both a rich description of the work process and the work force in the nation's railroad shops and an overview of the slow collapse of railway labor relations in the wake of World War I. Without the natural bargaining clout of the operating brotherhoods, the shopmen leaned heavily on the Wilson administration through the war in an effort to knit together a national organization capable of representing workers separated by firm, region, and skill. The American Federation of Labor's Railway

Employment Department made impressive organizational gains through the war, culminating in a 1920 national agreement that extended basic bargaining rights to all 400,000 of the nation's shopmen. But 1920 also saw the beginning of a broad managerial backlash against wartime concessions, and the Harding administration used the newly established Railway Labor Board to erode the promise of the 1920 agreement. In early July 1922 the shopmen responded.

In the later chapters, Davis narrates the progress of the strike. This is no mean feat, given the complexity of a strike that involved 400,000 workers and 1,700 shops scattered over more than 40 states (12,000 strikers and 62 shops in Iowa alone). There are, in Davis's account, three important elements to this story. First, the strike was imbued with the threat and reality of violence. Management, determined to keep the railways running, employed strikebreakers and private armies to protect them; the Pennsylvania Railroad, perhaps the most recalcitrant of the major lines, employed two private guards or detectives to every three of its striking workers. Second, the strike enjoyed remarkable and often official community support. Unlike members of the operating brotherhoods, the shopmen were deeply rooted in local communities dominated by shop employment. The strike was supported not only by the families of strikers (especially in women's strike auxiliaries), but also by local merchants and local police sensitive to the strikers' economic and electoral clout. Third, the strike involved a complex three-sided negotiation. Management was eager to break the strike, although a few "liberal" companies were willing to entertain the idea of a limited accord with the union. The federal government was reluctant to get involved, but the collapse of the nation's transportation system and pressure from management slowly forced its hand. And, as the prospect of winning their demands faded, the shopmen were torn between sticking it out and getting back to work on almost whatever terms management offered. In the end, a sweeping federal injunction, a dwindling strike treasury, and a Railway Labor Board tilted clearly toward management combined to force the shopmen to abandon their fight.

In a few respects, *Power at Odds* disappoints. Davis sets up the account as a synthesis of the "new labor history" and the "new institutionalism," but he does not consistently follow through on this promise. We get glimpses of race, gender, culture, and community, but these observations are offered almost as sidebars to the dominant narrative. And we get glimpses of the larger political economy, but for the most part Davis merely recounts what the state does rather than examining the character and assumptions of state power. The

result, not surprisingly, is a rather old-fashioned kind of labor history: the classic strike narrative. At times the analysis reaches beyond the account (given patterns of state and legal repression long before and after 1922, for example, I don't think Davis can sustain his argument that the Harding administration bears any peculiar or particular responsibility for the collapse of the strike). But the account itself is an important and compelling one. Its research and argument should put *Power at Odds* on the "read me" list of most students of modern American politics and labor relations; its narrative and literary qualities would make it a good text for graduate and undergraduate courses in these fields as well.

*"We Are All Leaders": The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s*, edited by Staughton Lynd. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996. 343 pp. Notes, index. \$44.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY DANIEL NELSON, UNIVERSITY OF AKRON

The dramatic expansion of organized labor in the 1930s has special significance for radical critics of the contemporary labor movement. They date the shortcomings of 1990s unions from the mid-1930s, when, they argue, union bosses and their political allies abandoned the egalitarian unionism of the early 1930s in favor of a safer, more bureaucratic and hierarchical approach, symbolized by the CIO and the National Labor Relations Board. The villains of this story are the traditional heroes of the liberal-left: John L. Lewis and other CIO stalwarts, President Roosevelt and his advisors, and, frequently, the leaders of the Communist Party. In this volume, Staughton Lynd, long a champion of this perspective, and like-minded scholars examine that earlier, purer, and more promising unionism, partly to set the record straight and partly to provide examples for present-day activists. Their case studies are readable and informative and, if nothing else, remind us that the events of the 1930s did indeed make a difference.

Lynd identifies "alternative" unionism as "democratic, deeply rooted in mutual aid among workers in different crafts and work sites, and politically independent" (3). Case studies of local unions (and usually strikes) by Rosemary Feurer, Peter Rachleff, Janet Irons, Mark D. Naison, and Elizabeth Faue tell similar stories: militant workers created democratic, egalitarian organizations, only to see them undermined and betrayed by supposed allies. Eric Leif Davin examines the local labor parties of the mid-1930s and reaches the same conclusions. Michael Kozura describes the widespread practice of bootlegging, or

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