Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–60. By Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolf. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994. 310 pp. $16.95 paper.

Historians have reconstructed in impressive detail the extraordinary extent to which the early post-World War II period was a turning point for labor-capital relations in the United States. Elizabeth Fones-Wolf inserts another facet into the mosaic with her thick description of the manifold ways in which employers individually and collectively fought a successful propaganda war against a refractory labor movement in order to frustrate expansion of the New Deal welfare state and to reassert their authority over a working class that was demonstrating an unprecedented willingness to challenge them through mass strikes.

The locus of these ideological battles was not only the workplace, where management tried to roll back the CIO unions' newly achieved counterpower in part by supplanting employees' class consciousness with "company consciousness," but also local communities, churches, and especially schools, where the corporate goal was, as one forthright executive put it, to "indoctrinate" teachers and, through them, students "with the capitalist story." The issues that Fones-Wolf convincingly treats range from the role of the state in controlling prices, creating full employment, and regulating labor-management relations to the functions of productivity and profits, and the place of individualism and anticommunism in American political life.

The book, which expertly draws on a rich variety of archival sources, would have offered an even more comprehensive picture had it covered several other vital fronts on which capital ultimately prevailed. These contests include capital's ceaseless campaigns to mobilize public opinion to reduce income taxes for the rich; agitation against national health insurance; and the struggle over portal-to-portal pay in 1946–47, which capital won by lobbying Congress to amend the Fair Labor Standards Act after having launched a press campaign branding industrial workers and their unions as greedy.

Fones-Wolf's research raises several questions of overriding significance for scholars and activists. Now that she has exposed the considerable resources that firms individually and concertedly devoted to persuading workers that the only way to achieve a better life for themselves and their families was to support policies that promoted the profitability of their employers, it is crucial to explore to what extent capitalist propaganda in fact succeeded in colonizing the minds of millions who, during the Depression, World War II, and the immediate postwar years, had seemed so open to developing an understanding of the irremediable defects of capitalism. The contest for ideological hegemony, that is, the dominant class's struggle to induce in subordinate classes the belief that it would be as senseless to want to abolish capitalism as gravity, so that no other social structure appears feasible, reinforces the spontaneous workings of the capitalist mode of production. Yet just as firms advertise because they fear that failure to do so will permit competitors to gain an advantage despite the fact that it is unclear whether advertising increases overall demand, capital may also have unnecessarily advertised its virtues as a system; it also remains unclear whether, despite all the trappings of formal democracy in the United States, the public opinion that capitalist propaganda needed to influence in order to implement its agenda was so thin that it barely encompassed the working class at all.

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