

Working for Democracy: American Workers From the Revolution to the Present

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Book Reviews

Working for Democracy: American Workers from the Revolution to the Present, edited by Paul Buhle and Alan Dawley. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985. ix, 148 pp. Illustrations, supplementary reading lists. \$19.95 cloth, \$6.95 paper.

Working for Democracy contains short essays surveying the struggles of the American working class from the Revolution to the early 1980s. Drawing on the writings of prominent labor and social historians, this slender volume offers a collection of interpretive pieces that synthesize recent scholarship. Most of the essays first appeared in the independent socialist weekly, *In These Times*, and editors Paul Buhle and Alan Dawley, like most of the other contributors, can be characterized as scholar-activists of the labor movement. Political action, in the form of a labor party, independent organization, or simply coalition building, gives the book a unifying theme.

Of the fourteen chapters in the anthology, three focus on black workers, two on women workers, and the remainder on other expressions of labor militancy. Not surprisingly, the essays vary in quality. Alfred F. Young's opening account of revolutionary mechanics is an excellent overview, including demographic information, job classifications, forms of political resistance, and the legacy of artisan republicanism. The Workingmen's parties of the late 1820s and early 1830s receive the attention of Franklin Rosemont. Eric Foner explores the often strained relations between abolitionists and labor leaders. In surveying working-class women from the 1830s to 1920, Mari Jo Buhle states that the often tense coalitions between middle-class activists and working women generally operated outside the mainstream labor movement. Alan Dawley's essay on politically self-conscious labor after the Civil War offers a cogent analysis of anarchism but only cursory comments about independent and nonpartisan politics. In a similar fashion, Paul Buhle's piece on the Socialists and Wobblies captures the vision of the latter in a spirited way while providing only a desultory treatment of the former. A creditable portrayal of black labor from 1865 to the 1930s is authored by Nell Irvin Painter. David Montgomery describes left-wing politics under the banner of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party from 1922 to 1944. While recognizing labor's gains under the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, James R. Green holds that when workers joined the New Deal coalition they traded political independence for Democratic party loyalty.

The book's last five essays probe more recent labor history. Richard Thomas analyzes blacks and the CIO from the mid-1930s to 1960, explaining how blacks used their own independent labor organizations as a vehicle to combat racism and to organize workers. The

mass radical activism evident in the 1945–1946 strikes was defused, says George Lipsitz, by the Taft-Hartley Act, the Cold War, and the expulsion of Communists from the CIO. Barbara Mayer Wertheimer, to whose memory the book is dedicated, summarizes the organizational efforts of women workers in the 1970s. Manning Marable identifies the crisis among black workers since the mid-1970s as a result of the acceleration of joblessness and underemployment, the demise of militant labor groups, the continuation of racial antipathies, and the shift to the right of a number of middle-class black leaders. The concluding essay by Sidney Lens discusses the contemporary weaknesses of organized labor and awaits the emergence of a new labor left.

Working for Democracy provides a very readable introduction to the history of American workers' recurrent struggles for power. Students, unionists, and the general public can benefit from the book's insights. The volume's chief drawback is that chapters varying from eight to eleven pages of text limit both the depth and the precision of analysis. Consequently a number of essays suffer from generalizations that miss nuances and explanations that neglect antecedents. The editors have succeeded, nonetheless, in presenting brief articles that chronicle and clarify the heritage of the American labor movement.

UNIVERSITY OF DUBUQUE

RALPH SCHARNAU

The Correspondence of Mother Jones, edited by Edward M. Steel. Pittsburgh Series in Labor History. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985. xlix, 360 pp. Notes, index. \$34.95 cloth.

In the history of American labor there is no individual more colorful and legendary than the white-haired Mary Harris Jones, who began her career as a labor organizer in her mid-sixties. Arrest, incarceration, threats, menacing company guards, recalcitrant mine owners, and long walks in the dark of night to meet with oppressed coal miners were common fare for the Irish-born woman whose matriarchal concern for American miners was appropriately recognized by friend and foe alike in calling her Mother Jones.

The Correspondence of Mother Jones contains 364 letters written by and to Mother Jones during the last three decades of her life from 1900 to 1930. The letters are arranged in chronological sequence and are published with original spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Footnotes and explanations of the letters' contents are kept to a minimum; notes identify individuals mentioned in the letters. The letters are preceded by a twenty-three page introductory essay by the editor, Edward M. Steel, professor emeritus of history at West Virginia University.

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