

## Teacher Strike! Public Education and the Making of a New American Political Order

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ence, heartbreak, and tragic notoriety from the early twentieth century to the present against the backdrop of the rising and declining fortunes of that blue-collar, industrial city. The book is a bit weaker when the author sets out to uncover just who the “real Sullivans” were, concluding ultimately and perhaps somewhat unconvincingly that prior to their entry into the war the majority of folks in Waterloo who actually knew them saw the five men as either unambitious louts or mischievous hoodlums. The reality of course is lost to history, as most of the Sullivans’ contemporaries are now gone. Kuklick’s actual evidence proves thin, consisting mostly of the town’s admittedly anemic response to the brothers’ deaths soon after the sinking of the USS *Juneau*. A more nuanced and balanced portrayal of the Sullivan brothers might have been appropriate. Still, Kuklick’s discussion of Waterloo’s response to the brothers’ collective sacrifice decades later is fascinating and worthy of attention.

In the 1990s, for example, Waterloo rode a wave of World War II nostalgia that resulted in the founding of a multimillion-dollar veterans museum named for the brothers. A highly engaged group of World War II veterans from across the country, along with more limited support from the city, helped make this possible. Steven Spielberg’s release of the World War II drama *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) furthered the legend of the Sullivan family’s collective sacrifice. Meanwhile, the city itself had hit some hard economic times, as postindustrial decline accelerated after the 1960s and resulted in the closure of meatpacking plants and other associated businesses. As Kuklick notes, “In the first part of the twentieth century, when the town was up, the family was down; at the end of the century, when Waterloo was down, the Sullivans were up” (166).

Ultimately, *The Fighting Sullivans* is a valuable work of cultural history. It spotlights a story that suffers tremendously from decades of calculated mythmaking and attempts to unpack and deconstruct those myths. It would be especially relevant as a text for courses that focus on Iowa history, World War II, or twentieth-century American history.

*Teacher Strike! Public Education and the Making of a New American Political Order*, by Jon Shelton. The Working Class in American History Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017. xii, 274 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$95.00 hardcover, \$27.95 paperback, \$25.16 ebook.

Reviewer John W. McKerley is a research associate at the University of Iowa Labor Center. He is researching the Keokuk teachers strike of 1970 and the origins of Iowa’s Public Employment Relations Act.

The 1970s was a critical decade in U.S. history. At the decade's outset, the U.S. labor movement was still a potent and well-recognized force in the nation's economic and political life. Although union members were sometimes at odds over civil rights and the Vietnam War, they were also crucial backers of and participants in the era's progressive social movements. Moreover, despite the increasing pressure of capital flight on unions, a new wave of public-sector organizing seemed to offer new possibilities. By the decade's end, public-sector unions had become a newly powerful force, but proponents of a revived free-market ideology (neoliberalism) were poised to undermine the power of organized labor as a whole and reshape U.S. politics for a generation.

Historians largely agree on the broad outlines of this narrative, but they continue to debate the identities of its main actors. In *Teacher Strike!* Jon Shelton makes an important contribution to this debate by focusing on the interplay between the rise of teacher unionism and neoliberalism in the context of the 1970s.

For Shelton, unionized teachers' willingness and ability to use strikes (especially illegal strikes) to advance their collective interests played a key role in shifting public opinion away from the "labor liberalism" of the post-New Deal era. By the end of the 1970s, he argues, "the nation's political center" had developed "a deepening sense that the labor-liberal state now victimized both white middle-class Americans and corporate America," leading to "new calls to let the market structure life in America" (160).

Shelton develops this argument by focusing on public debates provoked by a series of teacher strikes in major U.S. cities during the "long" 1970s (roughly 1968 to 1981). Most of the cities in question were in the East Coast and Midwest and reflected centers of a pre-1970s political economy based around the influence of predominately white, male, urban, private-sector union members. Shelton draws most of his evidence from newspaper opinion pieces and letters to the editor. Perhaps his most innovative sources are the letters sent by people across the country to American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president David Selden during his prison stay in 1970 for defying an anti-picketing injunction.

Since World War II, labor liberalism had substantially improved the lives of U.S. workers (especially private-sector union members) but left many public-sector workers, including teachers, behind. Although many prosperous urbanites (union members in particular) were initially sympathetic to teachers and other public-sector workers, those sympathies declined over the course of the 1970s as capital flight, recession, and inflation combined to undermine the urban industrial economies.

According to Shelton, this shift in sympathies also had racial and gendered dynamics. As employers fled urban centers, the most successful white workers attempted to follow them, often leaving behind financially struggling cities dominated by impoverished and excluded people of color. As teachers—women especially—turned to unionization for professional status and dignity in their workplaces, they came into conflict with people of color, who argued for greater control over the apparatus of the state (including schools) in the name of community empowerment.

These conflicts further alienated members of minority communities from unionism and labor liberalism and empowered conservative critics who saw both public employees and nonwhite urban “rioters” as having “flouted the law and siphoned off the resources of hardworking Americans” (2). It was these battles over 1970s urban teacher strikes, Shelton argues, that forged a producerist rhetoric in which owners and employees of private enterprise were “makers” in conflict with the unproductive “takers” of the urban (often non-white) poor and public employees.

Overall, Shelton makes a compelling case for the importance of teacher militancy in the debates over urban public policy during the 1970s. As he readily admits, however, the book, like any ambitious national study, leaves as many questions as it answers. What role did strikes by other public-sector workers play in this process? How did the provisions of particular laws (for example, arbitration) shape teachers’ risky decisions to engage in illegal strikes? If the teacher strikes of the 1970s played such an important role in undermining labor liberalism, why did the coordinated backlash against public-sector unionism at the state level begin in the 2010s rather than the 1980s? And, of particular interest to Iowans, how did states without large urban centers fit into this framework? Such questions are to Shelton’s credit, however, as they reveal the groundwork his expansive vision has laid for other scholars seeking the roots of neoliberalism in the United States.

*The Good Governor: Robert Ray and the Indochinese Refugees of Iowa*, by Matthew R. Walsh. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2017. vii, 233 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 paperback.

Reviewer Paul Hillmer is dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Concordia University, St. Paul, Minnesota. He is the author of *A People’s History of the Hmong* (2010).

Thanks to Matthew Walsh, I now see the connection between the gubernatorial candidate whose hand I shook in 1968 at the Clay County