

Hard-Pressed in the Heartland: the Hormel Strike and the Future of the Labor Movement

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west of Lincoln may have been more appropriate. But few will be able to fault his account of the trans-Rockies West, and anyone interested in urban development in that area should read Abbott's work.

Hard-Pressed in the Heartland: The Hormel Strike and the Future of the Labor Movement, by Peter Rachleff. Boston: South End Press, 1993. 135 pp. Appendix, bibliography, index. \$30.00 cloth, \$12.00 paper.

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What is the role of the historian when he or she is a part of the unfolding events that are the subject of the research? Should or can the historian be objective as both activist and scholar? Where is the fine line between historical research and personal account when the historian is an active player? Peter Rachleff's hard-hitting social history of the P-9 Hormel strike in Austin, Minnesota, in the mid-1980s raises these and other difficult questions.

Rachleff, who chaired the Twin Cities P-9 Support Group while teaching U.S. history at Macalester College, meticulously collected documents and kept notes throughout the strike. His not-too-hidden agenda, though, was to document and report a history favorable to the P-9 strikers. In challenging the perspective of the highly acclaimed, Academy Award-winning documentary on the strike, *American Dream*, Rachleff sides neither with organized labor nor with the meatpacking corporations. Rather, he sides firmly with the strikers, their local leaders, and the thousands of citizens across the country who believed the P-9ers were "victimized" by both Hormel and their international union, the United Food and Commercial Workers.

This book is divided into three sections. The first section contains a brief but well-conceived analysis of labor history, including an overview of the rise and decline of unionism within meatpacking plants. Rachleff argues that organized labor's influence has declined because of its inability to attract and organize workers, the deindustrialization of the U.S. economy, growing resistance to unions among employers, and the anti-union policies of state and federal governments. Throughout this section, Rachleff successfully connects P-9 to the militant roots of the labor movement.

The second part of the book focuses on the Hormel strike between 1985 and 1986, and in particular on the high level of rank-and-file activism coupled with the web of solidarity strikers experienced with people across the country. This core theme of democratic participation cuts through Rachleff's analysis of all other social and economic issues.

Even though P-9 eventually lost the strike, Rachleff argues that the strikers succeeded in bringing their message to the American people. As history, this is the strongest part of the book, even though it is clearly Rachleff's personal account. His own involvement provides valuable historical perspective and documentation.

In contrast, the third and final section—a summary that includes Rachleff's insights about the future of the labor movement—is easily the weakest. In an effort to rescue the labor movement from the popular perception that it is dead, Rachleff staggers through a discussion of how this social movement has progressed in nonlinear fashion through episodic leaps. While this analysis is, in part, true, his argument fails to capture the structural complexities of the labor movement. If the purpose of this book is, in Rachleff's words, "to urge social activists to reconsider the labor movement and their relationship to it" (91), then the author clearly fails to understand what the labor movement is all about. Its future lies not with social activists or intellectuals, but with everyday, ordinary people who are left with no other path to social stability and security.

Still, this is an important book, not because it is a strong historical account, but because it offers an important perspective on a troubling and hurtful strike. The book is easy to read and understand. Not only will it appeal to students of labor history, I believe it will be appreciated by workers and their families who experience contradictions and conflict in the workplace, and by high school students who are seldom introduced to labor history. The history of P-9 and packinghouse workers is not just the history of Austin. It sheds light on the history of every midwestern city in which meatpacking plants once provided the industrial base. Whether in Austin, Cedar Rapids, Chicago, Fort Dodge, Omaha, Ottumwa, Sioux City, or Waterloo, packinghouse workers have historically been independent and militant. Although flawed in many ways, Rachleff's personal account from his perspective as an activist/scholar is an important one.

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