Cornell University
ILR School

ILRReview

Volume 57 | Number 1 Article 89

10-1-2003

The Unmaking of the American Working Class

Reg Theriault

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/ilrreview

The Unmaking of the American Working Class

This book review is available in ILRReview: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/ilrreview/vol57/iss1/89

closed possibilities of cross-class and cross-racial solidarity might have helped make the narrative less deterministic and pessimistic.

Still, given Pitti's findings, and the fact that Ron Unz, one of Silicon Valley's most visible figures, is the recent founder of a powerful English-only educational initiative, optimism is not warranted. Website claims notwithstanding, there are clearly many who do not marvel at "ethnic diversity," and by the end of the book it is hard to argue with Pitti's conclusion that, long after the moniker "Silicon Valley" has died, race and racism will persist in the Valley. As he notes, the power of race has been the one constant—as immortal, adaptable, and persistent as Lucifer himself—in a place of substantial flux.

This is a book that is refreshingly direct and hard-hitting. Pitti states from the beginning that his perspective is resolutely "Luddite" in that he refuses to celebrate or be awed by the Valley's high-tech present. Given the sordid history of personal and institutionalized racial violence directed at non-whites in the Valley, a history that persists into the present, celebration would be repugnant. As would continuing silence. Too many historians of the Valley persist in venerating famous families and pastoral landscapes, with little mention of the mostly Mexican work force whose labor built family fortunes and cultivated lands. Stephen Pitti, however, in this work of great power and breadth, has broken the silence and given the Devil in the Valley his due.

Raymond B. Craib

Assistant Professor
Department of History
Cornell University

The Unmaking of the American Working Class. By Reg Theriault. New York: New Press, 2003. 211 pp. ISBN 1-56584-762-8, $24.95 (cloth).

Every once in a great while, a writer comes along to give authentic voice to the passions and frustrations of working people. Reg Theriault, a former fruit tramp and retired San Francisco longshoreman, is one of those rare and gifted authors. In a crisp narrative style that evokes both the turmoil and solidarity of the shopfloor, he tells stories, draws lessons, and weaves understanding from his lifetime of experience at work.

Theriault began his compelling journey into workplace story telling in *How to Tell When You're Tired.* Popular with students grateful for both authentic voice and narrative relief from the tedium of academic jargon, that earlier book brought a strong shopfloor voice into my own introductory labor courses. Theriault continues the journey in *The Unmaking of the American Working Class.* In a way, if you have read one of these books, you have read both. But the stories are different and the lessons more sharply drawn in the second book—and in any case both books are a great pleasure to read and well worth the time.

The core themes concern conflict, solidarity, and notions of justice in daily workplace interactions. In stories and penetrating discussion, Theriault captures the strength of spirit of workers pushed to their physical limits and moral boundaries. Through decades of daily battles and negotiation, punctuated by occasional wildcat actions, open strikes, and port shutdowns, West Coast longshoremen earned the pride, power, and decent living standards that strong unions in strategically placed industries can bring. This book demonstrates as well as any I have read why workers turn to unions and what they can gain from collective action.

At the same time, there is nothing glossy or romanticized in this account. Workers and unions (as well as companies and bosses) are served up with all their ambiguities and shortcomings. Complicated issues are addressed and sharpened—from union corruption and repressive labor law to political betrayal and the debilitating absence of an American working class political party.

Reflecting the range of shopfloor sentiment, Theriault occasionally veers away from lucid insights into either defeatism or simplistic solutions. There is little in the way of viable proposals or even hope for reversing the decline of the blue-collar working class. Instead, the author falls back on moral exhortation, such as: "We do not need an ideology to restore economic and social health to these displaced Americans. All that is required is to bring to these people that simple sense of justice and common decency that the vast majority of Americans already possess."

In the end, therefore, the message is unsatisfying. With a celebration of blue-collar work, there is also a a sense that true work is disappearing along with the blue-collar working class. But why should Theriault's core workplace insights not apply to much of today's non-manufacturing work force? He mentions organized nurses and teachers as examples of service-sec-

tor workers facing circumstances that promote solidarity and unionization, and these are good examples that can be extended to the organizing drives now taking place in building services, hotels and restaurants, telecommunications, retail, and other service industries and occupations. Could janitors, nurses, and Wal-Mart employees be the service sector longshoremen of the coming era? Why not? Are work, unions, and the working class really dying out, or are they taking shape in different ways that give rise to new forms of conflict and negotiation, based on the same kind of moral sense and solidarity that Theriault describes so compellingly from his own blue-collar experience?

In other words, I would actually give this book broader value than does the author. His insights extend far beyond traditional blue-collar work to address fundamental questions of democratic representation and collective action in a market economy—questions that will be with us for as far ahead as we can see. Theriault's guideposts and lessons, I believe, are more encompassing than he knows.

My only other quibble is that a book on dock work published in 2003 should have said something—at least in a preface or afterword—about the great West Coast port battle of 2002: the massive displays of both worker and employer solidarity, the slowdown and lockout, federal intervention, and the compromise agreement that has been both praised and criticized. It would have been enlightening to get this author's take on these historic events. This is undoubtedly a problem of publication deadlines rather than an omission by the author—but the 2002 conflict was critical enough to the story told here that it should have been included even if that meant a slight delay in publication.

Theriault has probably written something about that battle by now, and I am sure it is insightful from a shopfloor point of view. In the meantime, this book is well worth reading as it stands, from fruit-tramp start through crisp story-telling to discouraging finish. I recommend this book for bedtime or summer reading and gift giving as well as for basic courses on industrial relations, contemporary labor history, shipping industry studies, organizational behavior, human resource management, and—to venture beyond my expertise—literature or writing courses that focus on working class literary traditions. I agree with Robert Heilbroner who describes this book as "extraordinary," and Studs Terkel who calls it "absolutely wonderful."

Lowell Turner
Professor
New York State School of
Industrial and Labor Relations
Cornell University

Research Methods and Information Sources

A Guide to Sources of Information on the National Labor Relations Board. Edited by Gordon T. Law, Jr. New York: Routledge, 2002. xvi, 292 pp. ISBN 0-8153-0382-3, $85.00 (cloth).

This book brings together, for the first time (to my knowledge), the many disparate sources of information about the National Labor Relations Board (1935 to date) and its short-lived predecessors, the National Labor Board (1933–34) and the (old) National Labor Relations Board (1934–35). It also provides a historical backdrop for these agencies. As the introduction points out, the book is intended for those who have limited experience working with material relating to the NLRB. However, I think it will be seen as an invaluable research tool not only for the initiate, but for the experienced scholar as well.

Lawyers whose practice does not focus on labor law will discover much valuable information here on how to find NLRB and related Court decisions. The book provides practical examples of research on specific subjects, and of techniques for using unofficial reporting service publications such as the *Labor Relations Reporter* of the Bureau of National Affairs, Inc. (BNA). And even the most experienced researcher will find valuable guides to little-known online sources, such as Cornell's own LABORLIT Database (http://www.ilir.uiuc.edu/library/weblit.html), which includes references to books, articles, pamphlets, and other materials received in the Industrial and Labor Relations School's Catherwood Library since January 1989.

The book contains a treasure trove of information on the secondary literature pertaining to the NLRB from 1933 through 1995. Margaret Chaplan, Labor and Industrial Relations Librarian at the University of Illinois, not only has located seemingly every serious piece writ-