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[Review of the Book *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*]

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[Review of the Book *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*]

Abstract

[Excerpt] This is a superb book. Lizabeth Cohen has attempted nothing less than a major reinterpretation of how industrial workers became deeply involved with the union organizing drives of the 1930s. Rather than focusing on external stimuli such as governmental actions, Cohen explores in great detail the ways in which changes in working people's own attitudes allowed them to be participants in, indeed makers of, their New Deal. Her themes are critically important, broadly conceived, and explored with imagination and verve. Her extensive research matches her intellectual vision, and she sensitively uses such diverse sources as advertising agency memoranda, early radio scripts, and the banking and commercial records of a host of ethnic businesses, among other primary materials, to explore the social and cultural changes among workers during the 1920s and 1930s that allowed their involvement in the CIO. This is a book of serious importance for all who are interested in working people's relation to organized labor, the state, and mass culture in the twentieth century. It was with good reason that the book was recently awarded the Bancroft Prize in American History.

Keywords

labor movement, labor history, union organizing, New Deal, worker rights

Disciplines

Labor History | Labor Relations | Unions

Comments

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tudes allowed them to be participants in, indeed makers of, their New Deal. Her themes are critically important, broadly conceived, and explored with imagination and verve. Her extensive research matches her intellectual vision, and she sensitively uses such diverse sources as advertising agency memoranda, early radio scripts, and the banking and commercial records of a host of ethnic businesses, among other primary materials, to explore the social and cultural changes among workers during the 1920s and 1930s that allowed their involvement in the CIO. This is a book of serious importance for all who are interested in working people's relation to organized labor, the state, and mass culture in the twentieth century. It was with good reason that the book was recently awarded the Bancroft Prize in American History.

Cohen's focus is Chicago, specifically the sprawling city of steel plants, packinghouses, electrical manufacturers, and producers of farm equipment that employed a large percentage of Chicago's working class. Starting with the failed strike of 1919 and the subsequent inability of unions to gain a foothold during the next decade, Cohen explores workers' attitudes in an effort to understand these failures.

Chicago's workers were a disparate lot, she suggests, organized in their quite separate ethnic communities without great regard for the concerns of workers living in adjacent but sharply different ethnic and racial worlds. Largely organized around ethnic fraternal and mutual associations, banks and neighborhood groceries, and churches and associated welfare programs for the needy, these ethnic enclaves proved impervious to influence by even so powerful a cultural development as early radio broadcasting. Ethnic workers became neither middle class nor homogenized Americans as a result of their exposure to radio or the movies. Rather, Cohen argues, ethnic communities actively encased these new forms of mass culture in the ethnic particularities of neighborhood movie theaters and radio programming that maintained critical aspects of the older culture. In this context of disunity among workers that at times approached outright hostility, it is not surprising that corporate programs of welfare capitalism found greater favor than union organizing drives.

Up to this point, Cohen's story, although deftly written and rich in detail, is not very different from those told by Roy Rosenzweig, David Brody, and other commentators on the period. But Cohen's intent is to connect the two decades, to explore why and how the industrial

Historical Studies

Making A New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939. By Lizabeth Cohen. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990. xviii, 526 pp. \$27.95.

This is a superb book. Lizabeth Cohen has attempted nothing less than a major reinterpretation of how industrial workers became deeply involved with the union organizing drives of the 1930s. Rather than focusing on external stimuli such as governmental actions, Cohen explores in great detail the ways in which changes in working people's own atti-

workers of the 1920s became the driving force of the union movement of the 1930s. Briefly, she argues that the Depression undermined ethnic organizations and corporate welfare capitalism alike, and rather dramatically focused workers' attention on the state as one source of needed aid. The passage of the National Recovery Act, which led management to create employee representation plans to forestall unionization, had the reverse effect of allowing workers in those company unions to discover shared antagonisms and to develop solutions in their common interest—a process that laid important groundwork for the CIO.

Most important, Cohen writes that to understand this sea change in workers' attitudes, it is necessary to comprehend the profound difference between workers' response to mass culture in 1925 and their response in 1935–36, when the CIO drives intensified. By the mid-1930s, she states, the collapse of many ethnic institutions and aspects of the culture they represented primed many second-generation immigrant Americans to embrace the mass culture then presented in national programming on network radio and by the centralized motion picture industry. In the process of this cultural transformation, many industrial workers found that they possessed a public cause and a civic language in common with those they had previously thought alien.

One of the more important tasks Cohen undertakes is to account for the particular political orientation of these newly mobilized working people. In an insightful and thought-provoking discussion, she suggests that the industrial workers' concept of rights—that sense of legitimacy that allowed them to make demands on the corporation and the state alike—owed much to their experience with welfare capitalism itself. From that experience, many workers learned that capitalism could, *and should*, be fair to its employees; from it, too, they developed a concept of what Cohen calls “moral capitalism,” one tenet of which was that in a just society working people ought to fulfill at least some of their “long-standing expectations about America.” Cohen's treatment of this concept is complex and brilliant, for she recognizes how it can legitimize rights and yet simultaneously affirm for these activists a rather traditional, even conservative, political understanding of themselves and their society.

To this analysis, Cohen adds an important coda. The CIO itself, as an institution, recognized the broad outlines of this transformation and built its organizing strategy around what Cohen calls “a culture of unity.” The CIO itself utilized the techniques of mass culture to bring

the union into workers' homes, to build a union identity across plants and geographical regions, and to foster the family-orientated union culture that was so evident in the sitdown strikes of the era. As a result of this multi-faceted transformation, Cohen writes, the CIO could encourage “a social revolution . . . at least for a time.”

There are problems with Lizabeth Cohen's book. She pays too little attention to Chicago workers who remained outside the CIO; discusses black workers only sporadically; and is perhaps too quick to assert the “wholeness” of ethnic culture even in the early days of mass culture. Most important, she ends her book at an odd moment, as the glory days of early organizing gave way to the far more ambiguous decades to come. But make no mistake about *Making A New Deal*: it is a book of magnificent scope and complexity. Cohen's work has established a new benchmark, and the discussions and debates that have already begun in response to it attest, in part, to Cohen's achievement.

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