[Review of the book *Labour History and the Labour Movement in Britain*]  

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Abstract

While this volume contains some important pieces, it is uneven in quality, and several of the papers, in my opinion, should have been omitted. Given the very high price of the book, the fact that it omits Pollard’s important papers on factory discipline and his chapter from the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, and the ready availability in journals of the best papers, I cannot recommend it to anyone but librarians who happen to have unlimited sources of money. One can only hope that in the future Ashgate or another publisher will reprint, at reasonable prices, Sidney Pollard’s excellent monographs, *A History of Labour in Sheffield* and *The Genesis of Modern Management*.

Keywords

Britain, labor history, labor movement, management, working conditions, wages

Disciplines

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Comments

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action tactics at the point of production and practiced an inclusive brand of unionism (all workers join the One Big Union, no matter what their craft, ethnicity, or race, to challenge managerial control). Through these tactics, Local 8 was able to dominate waterfront labor relations for a decade, despite massive employer and government opposition. By the late 1920s the longshoremen had joined the (ostensibly) more conservative AFL outfit, the International Longshoremen’s Association. Meanwhile, New York City’s culinary workers also fought aggressively with direct action tactics on the job and actively organized a mixed-gender, mixed-ethnicity work force that the AFL typically ignored. Eventually, these workers also found a home in the AFL’s Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union. Kimeldorf’s version of AFL “business syndicalism” is different from—although informed by—the conception as formulated by Michael Kazin in his valuable study of San Francisco building tradesmen. Crafts in the culinary trades tried to limit entry into their work forces, establish work codes, and mandate that all jobs must go to union members. Despite the differences in organizational paths, types of labor, and work forces, these examples have much in common.

The author advises us to ignore the AFL’s concessions to capitalist hegemony and the Wobblies’ revolutionary rhetoric and focus on the workplace. No matter what organization, American workers all share certain things—notably, a propensity to act at the point of production for “bread and butter” issues. The main respect in which the two approaches differ is that business syndicalists were concentrated among skilled workers (New York waiters), whereas industrial syndicalists (Philadelphia’s longshoremen) were forced to be more militant and inclusive to overcome their relative lack of power as unskilled laborers.

Kimeldorf’s chapters on Philadelphia’s waterfront workers have some problems. For instance, his explanation for why the longshoremen had no union before Local 8 is weak. His discussion of why the Delaware River piers had an exceptionally diverse and heavily black work force is interesting but misses key parts of the story—in particular, the fact that blacks were pushed toward the unskilled, casual work of the waterfront because of their systematic exclusion from Philadelphia’s diverse, highly skilled manufacturing workplaces. He also plays down the Fierce competition between blacks and East European immigrants. Perhaps most significant, by choosing to examine Local 8 rather than other IWW strongholds, he stacks the deck in his favor by focusing on a powerful but, by IWW standards, unrevolutionary local. Local 8 employed AFL-esque tactics in attempting to limit its labor supply and came under harsh condemnation from some Wobblies for acting like the “American Separation of Labor.”

Kimeldorf wants to argue that the syndicalism of the IWW and that of the AFL were more alike than different while simultaneously acknowledging that the AFL’s version was more conservative than the IWW’s. By studying two groups of workers who joined the IWW and subsequently reaffiliated with the AFL, he emphasizes the similarities; seemingly, the “conservative” AFL was open enough to accommodate the militant IWW syndicalists. Yet, Kimeldorf needs to better explain how and why the AFL could be both conservative (exclusive in its membership) and radical (flexible enough to allow white ethnics and blacks to join).

Finally, Kimeldorf’s labor history approach is surprisingly “old school.” Despite examining multiracial, multiethnic, and mixed gender work forces, he rarely examines ethnicity, gender, and race as factors in shaping these unions. For instance, he argues that the IWW appealed to the 40% of longshoremen in Philadelphia who were black (a figure that will soon top 50%) because of the union’s militant tactics at the point of production, rather than its commitment to racial equality. Similarly, he treats the fact that New York’s culinary workers are men and women of various ethnic groups, some native-born and others immigrants, as a non-issue, which it surely was not.

Kimeldorf’s argument is fresh. I often had to ask myself while reading if my objections were legitimate or the mantra of accepted wisdom. Thus, I believe that this work is successful because it challenges us to rethink our assumptions. The book deserves wide readership among activists, historians, and sociologists interested in revitalizing American labor.

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This book is a collection of fifteen previously published essays by the late Sidney Pollard, one
of the leading economic historians of the post-war era. Pollard's work spanned much more than labor history, but he made several major contributions to our understanding of British labor history in the period 1750-1950. A History of Labour in Sheffield (1959) provided an in-depth analysis of workers' wages, health, living conditions, and working conditions in a major industrial city in 1850-1939, and has served as a model for historical studies of local labor markets. The Genesis of Modern Management (1965), while not strictly a work of labor history, is a classic study that contains much information on early industrial relations. In particular, the chapter on the adaptation of the labor force to factory work provides an excellent discussion of the problems of labor recruitment for early factories and the need to create a "new work discipline." Much of the material in this chapter had previously been published in two important articles: "Factory Discipline in the Industrial Revolution," Economic History Review (December 1963); and "The Factory Village in the Industrial Revolution," English Historical Review (July 1964). Finally, Pollard's "Labour in Great Britain," his outstanding chapter in Volume 7 of the Cambridge Economic History of Europe (1978), while a bit dated, remains one of the best available introductions to the development of labor markets in nineteenth-century Britain.

I mention these works because the most conspicuous aspect of this collection of essays is the absence from it of Pollard's two papers on factory discipline and his chapter from the Cambridge Economic History of Europe. Thus, the reader should be warned that this collection by no means represents Pollard's "greatest hits."

The fifteen papers included are grouped into three sections. The first section, entitled "Wages and Working Conditions," contains an interesting essay, "Management and Labor in Britain during the Period of Industrialization," originally written for a conference in Japan in the late 1970s, and four papers relating to labor in Sheffield. Two of these, both originally published in the Yorkshire Bulletin of Economic and Social Research in the mid-1950s, examine movements in real earnings in Sheffield from 1851 to 1914. Some of the wage and cost of living time series for workers in various trades reported here are not included in Pollard's monograph on labor in Sheffield, which makes these papers especially useful.

The second section, "Robert Owen and the Co-operative Movement," includes an interesting paper on the attempt by Robert Owen—successful businessman, philanthropist, and factory reformer—to reduce working hours in British industry, two papers on the co-operative movement in the nineteenth century, and one on the founding of the Co-operative Party in the early twentieth century. The third section contains six essays on "Modern Trade Unions and the Labour Party." Two of these papers deal with trade unions in the late nineteenth century, three with British and German trade unions' reactions to the Great Depression, and one with socialist proposals to nationalize the British banking system. By far the best paper in this section is "Trade Unions and the Labour Market, 1870-1914," originally published in the Yorkshire Bulletin in 1965.

While this volume contains some important pieces, it is uneven in quality, and several of the papers, in my opinion, should have been omitted. Given the very high price of the book, the fact that it omits Pollard's important papers on factory discipline and his chapter from the Cambridge Economic History of Europe, and the ready availability in journals of the best papers, I cannot recommend it to anyone but librarians who happen to have unlimited sources of money. One can only hope that in the future Ashgate or another publisher will reprint, at reasonable prices, Sidney Pollard's excellent monographs, A History of Labour in Sheffield and The Genesis of Modern Management.

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