Fire in the Hole: Miners and Managers in the American Coal Industry. By Curtis Seltzer.


Curtis Seltzer's new book on labor relations in the coal industry should be added to a list of required readings for students of history, political economy, or labor-management relations. Seltzer provides an important view of an area which has received relatively less academic attention than other manufacturing sectors such as the auto and electrical industries. He presents a well-thought-out, evenhanded analysis of workers, management, the industry, and the effects of mechanization on the work place.

Seltzer is perhaps best at dispelling industry "myths." One misconception has centered around why coal stagnated during the 1920-1970 period. As Seltzer states:

Conventional wisdom describes coal economics as the prisoner of a chronic "boom-and-bust" cycle. . . . Rather than seeing coal as a boom-bust industry after 1920, it is more accurate to describe it as a chronically stagnant sector that was further destabilized by a couple of atypical production spikes.

He identifies these "spikes" as marginal suppliers who gutted the market during boom periods and a management "doing little long-term planning or investment." The marginal suppliers in effect undercut the boom periods by flooding the market which in turn drained the more efficient companies of capital. This then forced the long-lasting "efficient" enterprises to deal more harshly with their employees. Because of this and the rise of other cheaper energy sources Seltzer argues, "The industry saw itself as relegated to a permanent third-class role in the American economy, a remnant sector, the material of liberal cheap shots and corporate head-shaking."

Seltzer's analysis of John L. Lewis is refreshing. While showing that Lewis was not afraid to take on management and the government whenever expedient, he parts from the UMWA's traditional view of "Lewis the sinless labor leader." Seltzer shows that Lewis was responsible for purging union dissidents, putting most of the union's
districts into trusteeship, engaging in shaky financial deals in the 1950s, and collaborating with the industry over the mechanization issue, which resulted in the union losing over two-thirds of its membership.

Currently there is much debate about the economic plight of the Appalachian Region. Both the Washington Post and the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette have published major articles concerning this issue. Seltzer’s work indirectly adds a new dimension to the debate by placing the Appalachian Region into a coal industry context. Like previous researchers, he identifies absentee ownership, along with political and economic forces, contributing to the development of bituminous regions. Seltzer also adds to the debate by framing the bituminous sector within the context of the anthracite region. Much of the way the bituminous region was developed was affected by the anthracite region’s development.

The social history of “the anthracite,” as it is known in the coal industry, is in many respects a subplot to that unfolding in the bituminous fields. Three ties bound the two together. First their markets overlapped. Anthracite began a long-term decline in the 1920s when it could not meet the competition from bituminous, oil, and gas. Second, the United Mine Workers succeeded in organizing both fields into a single labor union in the 1890s, pulling all miners together and giving them a common institutional framework. . . . Third, a small group of Wall Street bankers financed almost all of the anthracite companies and railroads and many of the bigger bituminous companies by 1900. . . . Bankers saw the coal industry in a different light than suppliers. Shifts in production from anthracite to bituminous were economic rationalizations that did not threaten their long-term interests.

The work is not without its weaknesses. The bulk of the study focuses on the post-WW II period, especially the Lewis era, the rise of Tony Boyle, and the rekindling of the dissident movement as reflected in the Black Lung and Miners for Democracy movements. Coverage of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is comparably brief. It does provide a framework for placing the mid- to present-twentieth century into a historical context but does not provide consistent in-depth analysis like that which is so skillfully made for the modern era.

A serious point of debate could rise from his thesis that “technique transforms the organization of work.” This argument is used when documenting workplace changes during the industry’s first hundred years. Some researchers, such as Bowles, Edwards, and Gordon (1983) look at the macroeconomy as being the primary determinant of the structure of the workplace. Seltzer states:
Beginning in the 1880s, mechanization figures prominently in the coal industry's labor relations and its ability to compete in the market. Machines created new pressures in the workplace, setting the stage for almost four decades (1890s to early 1930s) of bloody conflict. All of the changes that mechanization brought... were factors in that struggle.

But he goes on to state in the next paragraph:

Market forces demanded higher productivity and cost controls. The question is not whether mining had to be mechanized, but how... .

In effect, both positions are juxtaposed. Does, or does not, the market shape the workplace? Most would agree it is difficult to point to one causal theory. Every labor-management conflict must be examined within its historical context. Nonetheless, clarity on this issue would contribute to a greater understanding of factors affecting labor-management relations.

Seltzer does not provide us with any quick cures for the coal industry's ailments. He recognizes the negative impact of the boom-bust cycle on communities and the environmental problems associated with coal production and use. Because of the private sector's poor track record in these and other areas, Seltzer calls for the creation of a "public planning authority," which would remove decision-making from private hands, and oversee the industry so that a "public balance sheet" would become included within industry decisions. Considering the current political mood, such a suggestion will most likely fall on deaf ears.

Jim Dougherty  Department of Sociology  Indiana University of Pennsylvania  Indiana, Pennsylvania


Volume 5 of The Papers of Henry Bouquet is the lengthiest published to date. Unfortunately, because of financial exigencies, it is also by far the most expensive. Despite the price, however, it should