
BOOK REVIEWS

*Less Than Forever: The Rise and Decline of Union
Solidarity in Western Pennsylvania, 1914-1948.*

By Carl I. Meyerhuber, Jr.

(Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1987, Pp. 235. Notes,
bibliography, index. \$30.00.)

The struggles of workers and their allies underline much of the history of Western Pennsylvania in the past century. Although we know about many dramatic episodes and events in Pittsburgh, our knowledge of the labor history made by workers in more isolated areas suffers from some serious gaps. Meyerhuber seeks to remedy part of this problem, particularly in regard to the Alle-Kiski area. He describes the struggle for industrial unionism conducted by workers in the aluminum, steel, coal and electrical equipment industries. He pays particular attention to the coal miners as he narrates their struggles against the operators and the battles of their leaders for union power.

The drive for unionization and improved conditions undertaken by industrial workers and their union allies suffered a serious setback in 1919. Massive strikes by coal miners and steel workers failed as employers mobilized police power and public opinion to overcome the divided ranks and understaffed forces of the industrial workers. In the 1920s conditions worsened and setbacks multiplied. Suffering among coal miners intensified as overproduction and regional competition led coal operators to renounce unionization and to reduce wages. The events which resulted from these circumstances form the core of the book as Professor Meyerhuber weaves the threads of two interconnected narratives into a single pattern: the plight of the coal miners and their collective responses, and the power struggle among labor leaders for the hearts and minds of the coal miners.

After its acquisition by the Mellon family in 1925, the Pittsburgh Coal Company became a nonunion operation. Other operators such as Bethlehem Mines, and Buffalo, Rochester and Pittsburgh Coal also repudiated the United Mine Workers. Other steps often followed this decision as coal companies hired industrial police and strikebreakers. Now coal miners faced evictions as well as destitution. These circumstances helped to set the stage for labor wars filled with ambushes, beatings and

bombings. The 1927 strike called by John L. Lewis, President of the UMWA, provided official auspices for the struggle, but the union's limited resources proved no match for the guards and strikebreakers hired by the coal companies. In addition, the courts entered the fray on the side of the coal operators, most notably in the infamous "Rossiter injunction" of Judge J. N. Langham, which prohibited hymn singing as well as picketing, marching and rallies.

Internal divisions also weakened the coal miners and their union in this struggle and other conflicts. Some white miners turned their wrath against blacks and aspirants for union power engaged in many battles. Meyerhuber provides a clear exposition of the attempts by dissidents to unseat Lewis and to steer coal unionism in a more radical direction: the Progressive Miners Bloc, Pennsylvania-Ohio Relief, Save the Union and the National Miners Union. Their programs focused on union democracy, nationalization of the mines and a shorter work day. They failed, however, in their twin goals of aiding the miners and unseating John Lewis. Thus, Lewis remained at the helm of the union for the resurgence of the 1930s despite efforts to displace him by Socialists such as John Brophy and Communists such as Pat Toohey.

Scholars will find this volume useful not only for its clear narration of the complex regional coal story, but also for its valuable chapters on the police and the aluminum workers. (Both of these chapters, along with the remainder of the volume, draw on rich archival sources as well as the labor press and the local press.) Pennsylvania's police forces performed erratically during the coal conflicts of the 1920s and early 1930s as local police and constables, county sheriffs and their deputies, the state constabulary and company security forces engaged in jurisdictional disputes and other conflicts. Deputy sheriffs and industrial police often had unsavory reputations due to their numerous depredations. Their actions led to reform bills in the state legislature and corrective measures by Governor Gifford Pinchot. Problems persisted, however, until Governor George Earle secured the abolition of the industrial police system and the elimination of privately paid deputy sheriffs in the late 1930s. At the same time aluminum workers in New Kensington joined the CIO after the AFL failed to provide the support which they requested. At Local 2 of the Aluminum Workers of America, the Alcoa workers became involved in local politics and community action, conducted several strikes against Alcoa and spearheaded a national organizing drive. But the Communist issue and financial problems weakened the local in the early 1940s. These conditions led leaders to embrace amalgamation with the United Steel Workers of America. This "solution" brought stability

and strength — at the cost of the internal democracy and community activism characteristic of Local 2 in the late 1930s.

This volume has appeal to general readers as well as scholars. Professor Meyerhuber provides two features of particular note: an explanation of the limited role of workers and unions in Renaissance Pittsburgh and several engrossing, brief biographical sketches of neglected female labor activists. The ties between unions and industrial communities withered after a brief flowering in the late 1930s, leaving labor leaders isolated from the decision-making of business leaders and politicians, which led to Renaissance Pittsburgh. Their absence allowed the neglect of industrial renewal and the subsequent regional deindustrialization. While this deindustrialization spurred some rebellion, the activism sprang from community groups rather than labor unions. The thinning ranks of labor activists could no longer match their forebearers, some of whose exploits Professor Meyerhuber recaptures in a series of biographical sketches. For example, the reader meets Bridget Kenny, a charismatic and courageous leader of the Westinghouse strike of 1914; Fannie Sellins, a UMW organizer of both ethnic and black miners and steel workers in the 1919 strikes; and Mary Peli, who organized Alcoa workers in the 1930s.

The book does suffer from a few flaws. The author neglects several key secondary works, including David Montgomery's *Workers' Control in America*. The chapter on Westinghouse workers in the World War I era has valuable features, but the author drops the topic rather than recounting their unionization and the struggle for control of the union in the late 1940s. And maps would aid the reader in locating the numerous small communities cited in the text. Nonetheless, this is an important and timely book. Its focus on small towns complements the works of other historians and social scientists, such as the study of St. Clair by Anthony Wallace, which capture the texture of work and community life. This volume deserves a place beside the recent Dickerson and Gottlieb books in collections on industrial struggles in Western Pennsylvania. ■

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