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Book Reviews

Ahmed White, *The Last Great Strike: Little Steel, the CIO, and the Struggle for Labour Rights in New Deal America*, Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016, pp. xi + 398, p/b, £24.98, ISBN 978 05202 85613

White's book provides a depiction and analysis of the strike in 1937 by steel workers in the USA against a group of steel companies collectively referred to as 'Little Steel' to differentiate them from the monolithic US Steel Company. The Little Steel companies were Republic Steel, Youngstown Sheet and Tube, and Inland Steel. The macroeconomic and political context of the dispute was that of the penumbra of the Depression, the New Deal, and the Wagner Act whose legislation offered a tantalizing offer to trade unions of organizing rights but that engendered a determination by organized business interests to resist this possibility and, if need be, subvert the law.

The narrative provided by White is impressive in its breadth. A prodigious level of detail is brought to bear. His story is grounded in an economic, political, and social context that allows the strategic engagement between representatives of labour and capital to be clearly understood. Once the book moves from context to the events of the strike, it is impossible to put down. The events, at times scarcely believable, unfold as drama that could have been penned by Aeschylus.

The framework for White's investigation is provided by the limitations of employment law and the profound determination of big business to pursue its interests with astonishing brutality and indifference to democratic processes, action not possible without the support of the state apparatus. In short, this is a class analysis of industrial action. What also shines through is the uplifting and astonishing, indefatigable and valiant attempt, at enormous personal cost, of working people to defend their dignity, living standards, jobs, and communities.

The book is structured through three parts. These provide thematic narratives that coalesce and provide an explanatory framework for the strike: Part one, 'The Open Shop'; Part two, 'The Strike'; and Part three, 'The Aftermath'.

Part one of the book provides an explanation of the nature and genesis of the open shop; the technological nature of iron and steel production; the potential impact of the New Deal on industrial relations in the steel industry; the attempt by unions to organize the industry, and the strategic response of business to thwart this intention.

White connects the development and embedding of the open shop not only to the desire of steel employers to prevent union organization but also the development of the different production processes and hence organization of work associated with iron and steel that undermined the ability of craft unions to control production work through skill alone. This attention to the technological

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detail of steel production and changed organization of work provides a rich technical and sociological tableau upon which historical analysis unfolds. The tension between craft and industrial unionism and, in White's view, the reactionary nature of the former, is a theme that runs through the book. The inability of craft unions organized through the American Federation of Labor (AFL), in the context of growing union membership, to respond to the requirements of large scale steel, led to the absorption of the main steel workers' union, the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers (AA), into the Steel Workers Organizing Committee, the SWOC, and then the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). It was through the SWOC that the strike was prosecuted.

Part two, the main section of the book, deals with the antecedents and events of the strike, focusing on key moments from across the various companies and locations. In this section of the book, impressive and vivid detail is provided of

both key actors, picket line activity, and violence. Specific events are presented within a narrative that assesses the nature of the New Deal and the Wagner Act and the ability of employment legislation, in the face of corporate hostility, to provide succour to unions and their members.

The strike endured from May to August 1937 involving almost 80,000 steel workers across thirty steel plants. Brutal clashes between pickets, police, company activists, and the National Guard were commonplace. Over the course of the dispute, sixteen strikers and their supporters were killed and hundreds injured. Little Steel companies suborned police and purchased guns and thousands of rounds of ammunition in preparation for the dispute that was, in all likelihood, provoked deliberately. During the course of the strike, employers used aircraft to provide supplies to strike-breakers. The union used its own aircraft to harass company planes. Planes were shot at. Events scarcely believable.

Violence was particularly severe in Chicago, Warren, Monroe, and Youngstown. In Chicago on 30 May 1937, the Memorial Day holiday, police, armed and supported by Republic Steel, launched a deadly attack on pickets and their families. Ten strikers were shot and many more injured. In Massillon, Ohio, vigilantes, led by Harry Curley who commandeered local police, in the pockets of Republic Steel, besieged, attacked, and wrecked a union hall. Two workers were shot and killed, numerous more injured and some illegally gaoled for belonging to a union.

In Part three, White provides an assessment of the success of the strike in furthering the main union objective of recognition and its historical significance for industrial relations and employment legislation in the USA. In the process of drawing conclusions, White returns to the wider economic, political, and sociological context in which the strike and legislation were embedded. He concludes that the Little Steel strike was unique in that there has been no strike in the USA 'so rooted in the most basic question of class prerogatives and raw power' (281). Also, that although following the end of the strike the National Labour Relations Board used the Wagner Act to force reinstatement and compensation of strikers, the strike had in most respects, at its moment of prosecution, been a defeat for union organizing. It was the subsequent impact of the Second World War and rulings of the War Labour Board, in the context of post-war restructuring, that the United Steelworkers' Union was able to obtain negotiating rights for most of the steel workers in the USA. This period also saw the enactment, in 1947, of the business-friendly Taft Hartley Act that reflected the demise of the New Deal reformist approach to labour relations (276).

White contends that the Wagner Act reflected a 'naïve and contradictory' (264) view of the right to strike. Hence, whilst the law offered the right to engage in strike action, in the face of determined employers willing to subvert the law, it did not ensure that strikes could be effective. The law continued to strongly support the right of employers to carry on their business. White's assessment is that within a class society the law is ultimately unable to resolve the conflict between workers and representatives of capital. This, for White, was 'thoroughly exposed during the strike' (287). In the book's concluding comment, White characteristically contextualizes his view of employment law and invokes Upton Sinclair's notion of the strike: 'the purpose of the strike is to teach you what capitalism really is; to free you from the accepted falsehoods of your class'.

Within the study of employment relations, a focus on the nature and role of the individual is important yet too often overlooked in favour of the elucidation of sociological and historical patterns. Although not determined by them, the tectonic plates of labour and capital collide through interactions between individuals. In this respect, a strength of White's book is his attention to the biographical detail of the main protagonists. These include union, business and

political leaders, and political activists all of whom were instrumental in shaping the political and ideological filigree of their organizations and the strike. The story of the Little Steel strike would be incomplete and not fully explicable without an explanation of the role of these actors.

This is an important book. Its relevance extends beyond the field of historical study. Scholars of politics, sociology, and importantly industrial relations will find much of value in its pages. The events of the strike and their analysis have clear contemporary relevance. They resonate with events at Orgreave during the UK 1985 miners' strike and in the 2000 Detroit newspaper industry dispute portrayed in Chris Rhomberg's fine study, *The Broken Table* (New York, 2012). These moments of class collision demonstrate clearly that when pushed, the capitalist state and its apparatus will defend its interests with clarity of thought and brutality of action. A lesson trade unions and those who would defend trade unions will forget at their peril.

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