

Lizabeth Cohen. *Making a New Deal Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. 526. Paper \$23.99

Inspired, or more accurately, alarmed by the current backward drift towards the brutal economics of the Gilded Age, historian Lizabeth Cohen felt the time was right for a gentle reminder of the social and political conditions which converged in the years between the two world wars, igniting the labor movement and initiating the New Deal era. Reflecting upon the current losses of union membership, growing income disparity and hostility towards immigrants, this new edition of her 1990 book cautions us of what was gained and what can slip away.

Cohen centers her work on Chicago in the early twentieth century. As the second largest industrial center in the United States with a multiethnic workforce, the city's history is remarkably well-documented. Cohen states in the preface to this new edition that the specifics of Chicago's labor movement easily broaden into an understanding of the issues that faced labor nationally.

In response to such New Left historians as Stuart Ewen, who saw mass consumption as a tool of capitalism distracting workers from their own class concerns, Cohen demonstrates how working people exercised agency over consumerism, adapting the bounty of capitalism to fit the unique needs and tastes of the various ethnic communities that made up working class Chicago between the first and second world wars (1919-1939). Far from destroying class consciousness, ethnic communities adapted mass produced goods and culture to their own needs, while establishing commonalities within Chicago's working class. Everyone may have bought Victrolas, but the residents of Little Sicily listened to Caruso, while their Polish neighbors heard Wladyslaw Ochrymowicz. White Southerners had hillbilly music, and blacks the blues and jazz. Mass consumerism helped ethnic communities retain their identities while becoming a part of the larger American culture. This, according to Cohen, was a factor which helped diverse groups see themselves as part of a broader American context, bringing the working class one step closer towards a national labor identity.

A significant factor contributing to the policies forming the labor reforms of the New Deal was the failure of welfare capitalism. Originally conceived in the 1920s as an end-

run designed to undermine union organizing, businesses granted workers benefits and a greater voice in plant management. But as the economy weakened, the benefits workers had come to expect evaporated and the fragile relationship between management and workers began to unravel. Then, at the height of the Depression, FDR managed to redefine the Democratic Party as the party of ordinary Americans, replacing welfare capitalism with the welfare state. With the federal government shifting its support away from business, the growing labor movement gained force, making possible the formation of a national labor organization encompassing a broad range of working people--the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

Sidestepping political ideology, Cohen portrays working people as creative consumers and politically competent. Unlike their anti-capitalist European counter parts, Chicago workers saw labor unions as a means to a more just form of capitalism. Far from serving as the soul-killing tool of capitalism, mass culture provided an empowering bond that allowed workers to see themselves as members of a national labor community.

Making a New Deal offers a thoughtful response to Marxist despair, arguing that even within the context of capitalism a strong union presence did influence labor conditions. Yet, as Cohen points out, after World War II the government shifted its support back to business, undermining many of the gains won by the unions. We are warned that the success of the New Deal labor movement greatly depended on the support of the federal government. That ought to leave any activist or student of labor history chastened. For historians, Cohen's work offers a unique analysis of the social and economic components that coalesced into a viable national labor movement. In this current era of union decline, labor activists would be well served to understand the circumstances that built and later weakened the movement that brought laborers into America's middle class.

Rachel Kreisel

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