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Review: Strike! (Brecher)

Frutti Durruti

2003

A classic and ‘must have’ account of the history of militant labor in the U.S. from the “Great Upheaval” of 1877 to the infamous Teamsters UPS strike in 1997. To anyone interested in a background check on the U.S. labor movement, and/or enthusiastic about organizing in their own workplace and community, this book is beyond inspiring. It chronologically describes the high points of organized, self-managed mass strikes and the unprecedented acts of solidarity seen between vast sectors of the working class in the U.S.

First off, it’s a page-turner, marked with exciting accounts that are quoted by strikers and strike supporters along with candid and revealing descriptions of the enemies of militant self-managed labor: strikebreakers, capitalists, federal and state military/militias, governors, presidents, U.S. Congress, and even (surprise!) union beaureaucrats themselves. One of the most beautiful aspects of the book is its accessibility and readability for someone who has no formal education in labor history or is new to the research. It flows more like a series of stories, more so than a dry textbook style account. It brought goosebumps to my skin, it had me laughing and crying. I haven’t touched a book like this in years.

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Most of the book reads as a ‘play by play’ focusing on the cultural/economic/political/social ramifications of the most massive strikes, their successes and failures, and the methods and strategies used by labor and capitalists. The author goes further in analyzing how these different events warranted a complete revolutionary self-realization of huge sectors of the working class. He explores how militant collective action and working class solidarity crossed state lines, as well as the divisions between industries and trades transforming the working person’s everyday social life. General strikes, wildcats, sitdown strikes, sympathetic strikes, sabotage, slowdowns, and social strikes are shown to be tactics used by massive sectors of the working class throughout U.S. history, and not just by the explicitly revolutionary unions and working class organizations like the I.W.W. or communist parties. In fact, the actions of reformist union members and non-union members organizing for their own interests in democratic and councilist manners are the most remarkable examples of revolutionary class struggle possibilities. These militant rebellions managed to escape the limits of union bureaucracy and collective bargaining for mere concessions, and were the most successful in bringing labor close to the actualization of a classless, wageless society.

Something the book revealed to me that I found to be of high interest is how the major flashpoints were consistently ebbing and flowing, and held a constant pattern throughout U.S. history after the “industrial revolution.” The waxing and waning of militancy seems to attest to an ongoing battle between labor and capital, from its very beginning.

Many of the extreme examples of struggle go as follows: They start out as small rebellions within a specific industry, and most likely originating in the strikes enacted by the pissed-off workers at one or more jobsites. They are usually miserable, due to deaths on the jobsite, lack of livable conditions and wages, etc. Scabs are then brought in and protected by state militias. The strikers attack the scabs and the militia. More

than half of the time, the state militia and/or the strikebreakers hand over their arms to the strikers, refusing to break the strike and either go home or stay, fraternize with the strikers and join the resistance. Either way, the strikers continue to defend their right to strike, they become extremely self-conscious of their ability to organize themselves, and they mobilize the towns around them to defend the strike. The federal government sends troops in to restore “law and order,” and capitalist business as usual, but are met with a general strike, wildcat and sympathy strikes, and armed insurrection by highly organized sectors of the working class. This usually leads to regional and nation-wide labor solidarity, spreading to other industrial cities and creating massive warfare between classes.

The outcome of the strikes were either decided by firepower and state repression where the federal government always eventually wins, or the capitalists give in to some watered down demands. In all of these cases, there is an unprecedented level of transformation of the types of demands the workers were fighting for. The struggle began with requests for mere concessions, then developed into a forum where workers had a growing class consciousness, and all-out self-management by working people. There are by-and-large refusals of the old demands of “rights, due process, and wages,” and the recognition that the fights have turned into questions of ownership of property and production, the abolishment of capitalism, and the organized working class administering goods and services to each other in common without state, political, or union beauracrat intervention of any kind.

This change is shown in the resolutions drafted by several facilitators of mass insurrections, as well as the clear direction workers were taking in their actions (The seizure of property, the democratic councilist decision-making of workers from different industries, the socialization of distribution). Yes, these things happened right here in the U.S. Jeremy Brecher is not talking about the Paris Commune, Spain, the Ukraine

or Kwangju. He's talking about cities such as Detroit, Seattle, New Orleans, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis.

Most of the massive uprisings are separated by a decade and a half on average, up until post-WWII. The book's updated section focuses mainly on the descent of militant labor, the decrease in strikes in general, and the reasons for this direction. After the 1960's it seems like capital remained ten steps ahead of labor as far as being able to win battles more frequently and consistently. They employed legal and illegal political repression, beefed up street level policing, weaponry, sneaky propaganda campaigns, and finally a massive capital transformation into a globalized, international mode of labor exploitation. These capitalist advancements, which benefited the U.S. and the international ruling class, resulted in a tremendous loss of even the smallest of demands made by the working class. Millions drastically lost their job security, benefits, and rights they had all fought so hard to maintain for decades. Their attempts at defending these concessions led to an increased capitalist clampdown and tactical changes to defeat the rising tide of labor resistance. The late 1970's and the whole of the 1980's revealed the most atrocious anti-working class, anti-union politics and economic restructuring done by capitalists in the U.S. and abroad. The author tells of union's shifting gears several times in this era, in order to present new tactics like internationalist solidarity or explicitly 'non-violent' marches and demonstrations in reaction to often very violent police attacks on picket lines. There are very few successful campaigns in this sad era of capitalist globalization.

Brecher explains the shift in strategies inside the AFL-CIO in the '90's that helped to redevelop a progressive and growing labor movement, connecting communities and concerns like pro-immigration, women's rights, and equity for people of color into union organizing. There have been successful campaigns for immigrant rights, like the Justice for Janitors campaigns in Century City and elsewhere, as well as worker's centers in

rebellion, stifle dissent, and spy on radical organizers. Often, rank-and-file workers would denounce the union leadership, claim the union as their own, and use the union resources at their disposal for their own end. Other times, rank-and-file unionists would tear their union cards up, and/or create or join different unions (ex: industrial unions as opposed to trade unions) that claim to be in line with the tactics the rank-and-file would like to see employed.

Overall, *Strike!* was a treat to read. I felt that the areas I wanted to be explored more may have been whole books in themselves, so despite some concerns, I remained quite satisfied until the last page. It provides real examples of hundreds of thousands of working people acting in their own interests, organizing to feed themselves, work for themselves, and throwing off all attempts to stop them by capitalists and their reactionary allies. The events explored are windows into the possibilities for the real abolition of class society free of political bureaucracy and statist means. It is telling of the breakdown of social divisions within the working class in the midst of extreme forms of unconditional solidarity between workers. “*Strike!*” proves to be a resource for any working class person interested in discovering the rich history of class struggle right here in the U.S.

New York City organized by immigrant workers. Some unions have organized respectfully and tactically, sometimes they did it with degrees of ignorance to the concerns of these previously excluded sectors of the working class. Some unions and locals have won back small concessions, but by and large labor no longer displayed the kind of militancy and refusal of wage and private property in the way it once did.

Several times throughout *Strike!* I found a brief exploration into the social and cultural roles that immigrants, women, and people of color (especially blacks) faced in these manifestations of class warfare, and the labor movement in general. I was disappointed that Brecher didn’t explore these elements further, since he did take the time to very lightly touch on these subjects. When he did, he barely wrote about the reality of exclusion that existed for those who consistently weren’t welcomed in the largely white, male dominated labor movement. He did however, speak highly of instances during the most extreme examples of working class control of cities and regions, around the turn of the century. These instances stand as important insights into the organic development of anti-racism and the dissolving of patriarchal gender roles.

These examples are due to the self-organization of these sectors of the working class during great labor and social crises.

In the largest social and class upheavals, black workers were quite active and even started radical workplace rebellions. During the 1877 labor explosion, blacks organized as Virginia coal miners, Texan railroad workers, and St. Louis steamboat workers. During the massive labor movement of 1892, in New Orleans, three separate unions formed a city-wide “Triple Alliance,” which saw divisions in race to be an obstacle to ALL workers. The general strike that followed showed extreme examples of cross-racial solidarity and breakdown of longtime “Deep South” racial divisions. Brecher points out several times when blacks were excluded from the union and labor activity. At times, blacks were historically unsympathetic

with the strikes, due to their being barred from joining many unions. Sometimes they felt no guilt in being a scab. I'd have loved to have read Brecher dig into the roots of where these racist union policies originated. Were the union leaders only organizing white workers as a strategy specifically designed to be exclusive to certain European nationalities? Often they did organize European immigrants with great difficulty due to language differences, yet failed to allow blacks and newly-arrived Eastern Europeans and Irish folk to be members. How come Brecher doesn't delve further into the instances of racist actions taken by the Western European rank-and-file even in opposition to their union leader's policies? Though the theme of the book does explore the significant developments of labor militancy, class consciousness, and even cross-racial solidarity, ignoring blatant examples of racism by the rank-and-file is a mistake. Later, after the militant and highly organized black working class movements of the 1960's and 1970's, unions, on an institutional level, gradually started to realize the importance of an organized working class that included people of nationalities and races that were previously left out. Of course this is due to the self-organization of working class people of color and women, building movements for social change, and demanding recognition by the union leaders as well as the acceptance by their white male rank-and-file comrades.

According to Brecher, women have been integral in the development of labor militancy. "Strike!" provides the reader with countless examples of women acting in the forefront of strike activity. They provided support drives, community awareness campaigns, as well as organized economic and material resource collections. Often times, women have gone on the picket lines with children in tow. They've consistently stood in the front of labor marches and demonstrations, and have bravely confronted armed Pinkerton thugs and militia men with babies in their arms. Women have occupied

factories, defended workplaces from scabs, attacked troops, and helped to build worker's centers. They enacted organizations dedicated to educating women at large that a labor movement is and should be a women's movement. During the Depression Era, women involved in the massive auto worker's sitdown strike were breaking out of gender expectations and passivity into militant self-organized agents of feminist class struggle. They organized emergency brigades that attacked strikebreaking police in the streets, first-aid stations, welfare committees, childcare co-ops, etc. Against the protests of the men involved in the strikes, they set out to prove that they too are affected by capitalism, and have the right to take action against their exploiters. After realizing the power they held, and the potential for radical transformation of societal limits, women started to shed the expectations forced on them by men. At one point, housewives were known to go on strike against their lovers and husbands. They refused to cook, clean, and have sex, until their male counterparts recognized certain demands for equality. These, and many other cases of women's struggles were briefly explored throughout the book. After the civil rights movement, the labor movement has slowly become pro-active in organizing for women's rights in the workplace and at home.

The role of unions in these moments of advanced struggle are explored thoroughly in *Strike!*. Brecher does great service to exposing the ills of the history of the U.S. union's top-down structure. He goes in depth about how union leaders would either take control of strikes, or would outright condemn the rank-and-file's right to organize militantly and democratically. In virtually every case where the rank-and-file broke a contract or went against the will of union leaders to act on their own, the union leadership systematically mobilized AGAINST the rank-and-file. There are a few exceptions, and most of these rare exceptions where attempts by the union leadership to seize control of the strike committees, in order to de-escalate