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When Workers Fight: The Politics of Industrial Relations in the Progressive Era

by Bruno Ramirez, Westport, Connecticut and London, Greenwood Press, 1978, 241 pp.

When Workers Fight by Professor Bruno Ramirez is a study of developments in industrial relations in the Progressive Era. The history of industrial relations has been, for the most part, a stepchild, neglected by both labour history and business history, as the author correctly notes. Thus, this book covering an era of crucial importance in the evolution of the relationship between capital and labour in the United States is most welcome. While in outline the book does not offer a really new thesis, heavily building on the interpretations of, among others, Philip S. Foner and James Weinstein, it very much fleshes out a narrative history and brings together hitherto isolated variables.

The author focuses on the "golden age" of the trade agreement, 1898-1905, and its aftermath. He traces the development of the trade agreement by industrialists and politicians, in concert with the organized labour component of the National Civic Federation, in response to the so-called "strike problem" of the late nineteenth century, and the felt need to stabilize industry. Dealing especially with developments in industrial relations in the mining industry, and eschewing superficial explanations in terms of villains and dupes, Professor Ramirez shows how the National Civic Federation came to fill an institutional vacuum; its leaders, such as Marcus A. Hanna, Ralph M. Easley, John Mitchell and Samuel Gompers, used the trade agreement as a mechanism to integrate organized labour into an accepted, albeit disciplined, place in the public dialogue. But the trade agreement could not be described as the governing principle of management-labor relations even at the peak of its popularity. Its utilisation tended to be somewhat limited to N.C.F. personnel while, simultaneously, efforts went forward by other industrialists to rationalize industry by destroying existing unions, thereby achieving complete worker control.

The trade agreement not only failed to become the universal model its promoters idealized, but it was not even a factor in the emerging mass production industries which were dependent on the newest unskilled immigrants. By 1905, winds of change began to erode the trade agreement, and industrial relations in the second half of the Progressive Era had even less of a definite shape. Industrialists turned more blatantly to other devices of worker control, often with the tacit approval of the craft unionist leadership. Professor Ramirez devotes chapters to alternate methods of worker control, such as welfarism (curiously, he fails to include a chapter on scientific management, although he correctly denies that Taylorism was totally divorced from welfarism). He includes a useful consideration of the Canadian innovation of compulsory arbitration and the resulting American controversy, after it was discussed by the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations before which Mackenzie King testified.

Finally, the author turns to an appraisal of the role played by the Industrial Workers of the World, the arch-foe of contractual relationship with a management whose legitimacy it totally challenged. While expounding a revolutionary assessment of the I.W.W. at variance with a number of current interpretations, his analysis unfortunately collapses into a conjectural discussion rather than a detailed argument, and it might well have been omitted. A brief epilogue fails to bring the various issues together; the reader would have been better served by a full and focused conclusion to the monograph.

Indeed, the major weakness of the book is that in its welcome effort to synthesize a number of approaches to industrial relations, it tends to fragment and to sacrifice coherence. Another flaw, presumably reflective of the book's original conceptualization as a Ph.D. dissertation, rests in the author's inability to weed out unnecessary quarrels with almost all earlier secondary sources. These distractions weaken the value of the book, and sometimes even leave the author

out on a limb. Here and there, too, the author embraces unwarranted assumptions; for example, he correctly notes that a more positive attitude towards an open door immigration policy in business circles emerged around 1905, but that changed attitude should not be suggested to have produced the ever climbing immigration figures from 1907 to 1914.

Despite its flaws, this is a most useful study of a neglected subject, and it convincingly demonstrates the dual nature of collective bargaining in the period whereby organized labour became institutionalized into the political and economic structure while at the same time labour in general had limitations placed on the ultimate role it would play in American society.

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The Social Organization of Strikes, by Eric Batstone, Ian Boraston and Stephen Frenkel, Oxford, Warwick Studies in Industrial Relations, 1978, 236 pp.

Ce livre est le deuxième des auteurs réalisés à partir d'une recherche empirique qu'ils ont effectuée dans une importante usine d'ingénierie en Angleterre. Le premier volume, **Shop Stewards in Action**, contient des détails sur l'usine et sur les approches conceptuelles et méthodologiques des auteurs qu'il peut s'avérer utile, sinon nécessaire, de lire pour toute personne qui veut tirer le maximum du présent ouvrage.

Les auteurs s'intéressent au processus de mobilisation des travailleurs en vue d'une grève. Leur étude, conduite sur une période de quatre mois, leur a permis d'observer 25 jrs grèves ou situations dans lesquelles des grèves furent évitées de justesse. Ils veulent ici montrer comment les grèves se produisent en mettant l'accent sur les modèles de pouvoir existant parmi les travailleurs. Pour les auteurs, la préparation d'une grève est un processus social qui implique des systèmes

d'influence et de pouvoir. Tout en reconnaissant que les grèves, comme forme du conflit industriel, reflètent la dépendance des travailleurs envers l'entreprise et la société en général, ils privilégient cependant l'étude des processus de négociation qui surgissent entre les travailleurs eux-mêmes. Ils s'attachent donc moins aux conditions générales qui favorisent la grève qu'aux conditions spécifiques dans lesquelles elle se réalise. Ils choisissent par le fait même de laisser de côté le rôle de la direction sur le déclenchement d'une grève.

L'ouvrage est divisé en deux parties. La première est consacrée à l'étude des relations de pouvoir existant parmi les travailleurs et par lesquelles les mouvements de grève furent encouragés ou contenus. Les auteurs s'attardent d'abord à différencier la grève de d'autres types d'action collective. Cela les amène ensuite à expliquer pourquoi la direction ne définit pas toujours les arrêts de travail comme des grèves: en général, les arrêts de travail où les travailleurs ne quittent pas l'usine et où la situation, au moment même ou après l'action, est considérée comme légitime par la direction ne sont pas classés comme grèves. Il s'ensuit donc que les arrêts de travail initiés par les travailleurs sont plus fréquents que les statistiques de grève ne le suggèrent.

Les auteurs considèrent ensuite les conditions qui facilitent la grève. Ils se limitent cependant aux facteurs liés à la technologie et à l'organisation des groupes de travail, ce qui les amène à parler du phénomène du pouvoir, ainsi qu'aux conditions institutionnelles et organisationnelles.

Les 3 chapitres suivants sont consacrés à l'étude plus détaillée du processus de mobilisation en vue d'une grève: les auteurs se concentrent sur le vocabulaire particulier qui s'associe à une grève éventuelle; en se dirigeant vers la grève, les travailleurs et leurs officiers syndicaux se créent une «logique», un «rationnel» pour justifier leur action. Les auteurs examinent ainsi le vocabulaire utilisé autant pour s'opposer à une grève que pour la supporter et autant du point de vue individuel que collectif (chap. 4).