

## Organizing the Meatpacking Industry in the United States

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# REVIEW ESSAYS / NOTES CRITIQUES

## Organizing the Meatpacking Industry in the United States

Randi Storch

Rick Halpern, *Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago's Packinghouses, 1904-54* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1997).

Shelton Stromquist and Marvin Bergman, eds., *Unionizing the Jungles: Labor and Community in the Twentieth-Century Meatpacking Industry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press 1997).

THE HISTORY of the meatpacking industry and the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) raises questions about class, industrial relations, race, gender, and ethnicity in the United States. This industry's history, which entwines traditional institutional questions with those of workers' agency, suggests how changing work processes influenced workers' political development and encouraged unified action among previously divided groups. Its story also embraces the surrounding neighbourhoods where community figures played an increasingly important role in determining the success of union drives. Halpern's study and Stromquist and Bergman's collection are two of the best examples from a growing number of monographs, dissertations, and articles on the meatpacking industry that capture the human experience of industrial relations in 20th-century America. By integrating rich oral histories with archival research, and by offering a variety of thought-provoking perspectives on the meatpacking industry and the nature of its union,

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Halpern and the scholars who contributed to Stromquist and Bergman's edited collection revisit familiar questions with fresh material gleaned from local struggles.

Rick Halpern extends his organizational history into the community where political movements sparked early union activism, arguing that the history of Chicago's UPWA was shaped by shop-floor militancy and rank-and-file struggle rather than top-down bureaucratic methods. Organizing his study chronologically, he begins before the union's 1943 birth and uses each chapter to show that shop-floor struggles determined the tenor of the stockyards' labour relations. In the context of World War I's labour shortages and spontaneous labour stoppages in the yards, a small group of labour activists began a unionization drive with the support of the Chicago Federation of Labor. The Stockyards Labor Council (SLC), which led this drive, gave activists an opportunity to challenge the racial and ethnic divisions that divided the yards workers by interlocking various craft unions into one organization and reaching out to African Americans who were new to the industry. Although the SLC achieved small concessions through wartime arbitration, it failed to carry these successes into the postwar period. Beset with racial tensions that climaxed with the widespread race riots of 1919, the SLC was unable to weather the 1921 recession and a strike loss at the beginning of the next year. Caught between company pressures and the battles between the SLC and the AFL union in the yards, black and white workers abandoned the SLC and its leaders were forced to wait over a decade for a climate more conducive to build membership.

Halpern explains that welfare capitalism of the 1920s helped provide the staging ground for 1930s union activism. In theory, company unions offered workers a place where they could articulate demands. Wage incentives would give workers more earning potential. Personnel departments would centralize and standardize the corporate experience, removing some power from the often ruthless foreman. And finally, benefit packages and sports teams would encourage company loyalty. But Halpern demonstrates that these plans often did not work in practice. Company unions became extensions of the employer, offering only cosmetic fixes. Wage incentives resulted in speed ups. Foremen still ruled with a heavy hand and few workers profited from the fringe benefits of the period. Moreover, welfare capitalism had an even uglier side. To keep workers in order, companies maintained private police forces, stocked arsenals, and utilized an army of informants. Although workers rarely organized coordinated unions in the 1920s and the early 1930s, Halpern argues that workers' traditions of solidarity and militancy persisted at the "subterranean level." (76) In rethinking the traditional labour history of the 1920s, Halpern joins Lizabeth Cohen and other historians who have argued that *welfare capitalism, through its limited opportunities in company unions, its irregular company benefits, and its unifying company-sponsored social events, ironically sparked ideas and actions that built workers' confidence and laid the basis for future activity.*

It took workers until 1937 to realize their militant potential and form a single organization on Chicago's shopfloors. At the request of rank-and-file activists, including a number of Communist party members, the CIO's national Packinghouse Workers' Organizing Committee (PWOC) provided an institutional umbrella under which shopfloor activists could organize. Unlike the bureaucratic leadership of some CIO outfits, such as the Steel Workers Organizing Committee that concentrated its decision-making powers at its highest levels, the national PWOC was unable to change the nature of Chicago's local packing workers' organization. Halpern argues that rather than signalling an end to rank-and-file militancy, the influx of PWOC funds and staff helped solidify the power of Chicago's yards workers. PWOC's local movement built on the inter-racial relationships communists developed in the larger plants through the late 1920s and early 1930s and on the experience and militancy of veteran workers in the smaller plants. Bolstered by community activity initiated by communists in the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council, PWOC became a powerful force in the yards and throughout the city. By the end of the 1930s, its leaders called on favours from Mayor Ed Kelly and worked with Democratic politicians in Chicago's African-American community. And while PWOC activists built on the unity of the CIO and New Deal sentiments, they limited their dependency on bureaucratic structures and agencies to solve their problems, creating a militant shop-floor movement and building a web of support in the community.

The union's activist orientation thrived when a new African-American workforce filled Chicago's shops during the war and postwar periods. Leadership evolved from the relationship between new black workers and communists in the union. Because communists acted less as a Marxist political group and more as a vehicle for blacks to fight and achieve civil rights in the industry, a strong coalition formed, continuing the union's tradition of shop-floor militancy. Joined by activists from Iowa, Nebraska, and to a lesser extent Minnesota, Chicago's PWOC militants succeeded in creating their own international union, the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA). Rather than the birth of a new tradition, Halpern argues, the UPWA continued a long tradition of shop-floor and civil activism initiated by the workers themselves.

Thus, in the postwar period, as the steel and auto unions became bureaucratic and anti-communist, the UPWA took a different path by transforming its organizing committee into an international union committed to militant action and activism on the shopfloor. Putting all their energies into civil rights work, Chicago's unionists found constructive ways to put distance between postwar factional battles and their social vision. Thus, the death of Chicago's movement in the late 1950s was not due to the Cold War's political factionalism, but instead was a part of Chicago's deindustrialization.

While following the contours of an organizational history, Halpern keeps his eyes on the shopfloor and on the ways in which the fight for racial equality shaped

Chicago's meatpacking unions. From 1904 through the 1950s, African Americans moved from being strike breakers to unionists and shop-floor leaders. Rather than portraying these actions as random acts of solidarity and fragmentation, Halpern contextualizes community, workplace, and union politics in each chapter. Each context created tensions that pulled workers in different directions. By the 1930s the racialized images of scabs, which were so divisive in the World War I period, lost their basis in reality. And from the World War II period into the postwar period, African Americans proved to be the most prominent leaders of Chicago's meatpacking unions. By analysing this shift, Halpern makes a powerful argument for the historical contingency of class and race solidarity in the United States.

Although Halpern's argument that race and shop-floor militancy shaped the experience of workers in Chicago's meatpacking industry is both interesting and largely convincing, he leaves some avenues unexplored. In his introduction, he makes a point of discussing the complexity of race as a relationship between groups, critiquing those who substitute "race" for "black." (2) Yet, Halpern falls victim to the same substitution. In Chicago's meatpacking industry, a focus on the solidarity of whites and African Americans allows for Halpern's compelling story. Yet his emphasis on militancy, democracy, and civil rights tells us more about the racial notions of communists (both black and white) and black workers than it does about white workers. Did non-communist white workers rethink their racial identity when they joined the union?

Many of the themes addressed in Halpern's monograph receive broader treatment in the collection of essays edited by Stromquist and Bergman. This collection derives from a 1994 conference organized by the Center for Recent United States History (CRUSH), a consortium of archives and research institutions, whose organizers chose meatpacking workers and their union as the first subject in a series of "scholarly conversations" devoted to new research in the 20th century. The essays offer well-researched insights into the ways time and place impinge on scholars' interpretations of the same institution, and put Halpern's focus on Chicago in a national context.

In their introduction, Stromquist and Bergman skilfully review the highlights of the conference and thus prepare the reader for the collection's geographical and topical diversity and for the points of contention among the authors. Three fruitful themes are carried throughout the work: the principles that shaped the Packing Workers Organizing Committee; the way the rank-and-file carried these principles into their international union, the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA), during the war and postwar period; and how technology and demographic changes altered the face of UPWA's vision of social unionism in the post-1960s period.

Reasons for joining the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee varied by locality. According to Paul Street, workers shaped the welfare capitalist promises that Chicago's Swift management made to them in the 1920s. When the

company betrayed these promises in the 1930s, workers built a militant CIO union in response. Peter Rachleff explains that workers in Austin, Minnesota joined the CIO for different reasons. Changing industrial relations, which Rachleff argues were characterized by national unions with "incorporated internal hierarchies and vertical structures," forced Austin's packinghouse workers, who were organized into a militant community-based union, the Independent Union of All Workers (IUAW), into the PWOC. Rachleff pits the centralization and bureaucracy of the CIO, with its "incorporated internal hierarchies" in opposition to the "bonds of local solidarity" that the IUAW activists lost when they became a part of the CIO. (69) In an argument for historical contingency, Rachleff harkens back to a period when the national character of the labour movement was locally based and when individual communities struggled against the growing bureaucracy and nationalism of stifling union establishments. In stark contrast to Rachleff's depiction of the CIO, Rick Halpern emphasizes the real sense of power and democracy the CIO's PWOC offered to its members. For example, in both his article and his book, he describes PWOC as an organization where African-American workers asserted their militancy, while working with white and black Communist party members, to better working conditions on the shopfloor and to stomp out discrimination in the surrounding neighbourhoods.

Chicago's role as a militant centre of racial equality and social unionism continued through the postwar years and drove the policies of the International Union. Bruce Fehn's article shows us that workers in Waterloo, Iowa emulated Chicago's model by using the International's anti-discrimination policies as a springboard off of which to work for racial equality in the community. In other cities, however, tension between local agency and the International's social agenda plagued the United Packinghouse Workers of America. Wilson Warren paints a picture of UPWA unionism throughout the Midwest that contrasts with Fehn's. Instead of locals committed to the International's programs of civil rights and anti-discrimination, Wilson analyzes the conflicts that developed in four Midwest communities after the 1948 industry-wide strike. "Instead of being able to identify with their International union leaders' universal aspirations for the solidarity of blacks, and whites, workers could only identify with the specific people that they knew." (148) Wilson shows how, in places like Omaha, Nebraska, the International's anti-discrimination programs failed because of white workers' racism, their fears of Communism, and postwar demographic changes that resulted in increased residential segregation.

Several of the articles discuss how gender issues also created new tensions between the locals and the International. Roger Horowitz compares the International's unequal emphasis on promoting the rights of African Americans versus those of women, an observation further developed in the articles by Dennis Deslippe and Deborah Fink. Deslippe argues that through the mid-1970s, male unionists resisted full implementation of Title VII, which might have empowered

women to demand equality in the workplace. Instead, Deslippe explains, the packinghouses' industrial structure and the organizational history of the UPWA aided male union leaders in the neglect of women's rights. As men and women battled for fewer and fewer jobs, women turned to the law to protect their jobs, while men depended on their union's traditions of local autonomy. Fink finds that by the 1980s changes in the industry further promoted a workforce and union completely uninterested in protecting the rights of its women workers to equal pay and equal opportunity to jobs. Moreover, women themselves were divided over whether to push for better working conditions. Fink shows us that the problem of gender inequality in the workplace was larger than the indifference of the International, the hostility of fellow workers, or the changes brought by new technology, though they all played a role.

Bringing changes in meatpacking to the modern-day, Deborah Fink and Mark Grey detail the efforts of the Iowa Beef Processors (IBP) on workplace and community relationships. By specializing in one slaughter operation, selling its meat generically, and moving its operations out to rural areas, IBP became the world's largest beef slaughterer by 1969 and has recast the tenor of industrial relations up to the present. Fink focuses on the construction of gender divisions between male and female workers in Perry, Iowa's IBP plant where in 1992 she worked for four months. She argues that despite women's increased presence within the meatpacking industry since World War II, and their bolstered legal position through the Civil Rights Act, "a shared male identity" that "provided the illusion of a common interest among a segment of workers and management," hampered workers' solidarity. (219) While Fink finds that social constructions of gender created problems within the plant, Mark Grey focuses on modern-day Storm Lake, Iowa, analysing the pressures that corporations, such as IBP, place on its surrounding community. He argues that without providing adequate jobs to support the workforce, IBP has brought new problems to Storm Lake, including changes in its demography, which have had detrimental effects on the community's schools, health care, and crime rates.

While this provocative collection documents sweeping changes in the meatpacking industry within the last century, it is unable to offer thorough examinations of certain periods and topics, suggesting areas for future research. For example, the regional variety of articles on the immediate postwar period is lacking for the earlier period of PWOC's formation as well as for the contemporary period, making it difficult to measure how unique each example is. This comparative work is also thin on the period of the UPWA's formation and on the wartime experiences of the union, and the collection ignores the experiences of Canadian locals (admittedly a region out of CRUSH's area of concern). Also, throughout the collection, communists occasionally appear, but there is no systematic discussion of their ideology and their effect on the union, despite the important role they played in the International and within several locals. These points, however, may be too much

to ask from one collection of essays, especially one that has so successfully opened other avenues of inquiry and debate.

For anyone interested in studying the changes within the meatpacking industry both works prove their value. Together they analyze the astounding shifts in technology, labour segmentation, union strength, and workers' racial and gender ideologies that have occurred over the last century. And by providing strong arguments for historical contingency and human agency, both Halpern's study and the collection of essays speak to the modern labour movement offering vision and hope.



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