

The Fragility of Coal Miner Unionism in Gilded Age America

Caldemeyer, Dana M. *Union Renegades: Miners, Capitalism, and Organizing in the Gilded Age*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021. viii + 231 pp. \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0252043505; \$30.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0252085406.

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Historians have examined the history of midwestern coal mining over the course of many decades with numerous insightful contributions. Dana Caldemeyer adds to that historiography with a fresh perspective in *Union Renegades*. Her study focuses on the coal mining industry, primarily from Kansas to Kentucky, at the end of the nineteenth century, and the workforce that had a complicated though pragmatic view of labor unions. These workers were not necessarily anti-union, but whether they joined or not depended on tangible benefits that they could expect to receive. Many were not miners by trade but farmers, farmworkers, and other laborers who took up coal mining periodically. These workers posed a problem to union organizers because they did not always see joining labor unions as in their best financial interest. In fact, Caldemeyer argues that a significant portion of the workforce shared some of the same values of their employers: they put their individual and family needs ahead of the collective needs of their fellow coal miners. This cohort's historical agency allows *Union Renegades* to problematize the usual dichotomy between union or non-union workers. Caldemeyer makes excellent use of the writings of coal miners and their wives, which appeared in a variety of newspapers, journals, and periodicals and revealed their savvy understanding of labor unions, employers, and the ability to earn a living in coal mining.

Caldemeyer has several major arguments to make. According to her research, these rural workers, or “producers,” had a variety of workplace identities owing to their various occupations. They did not necessarily think of themselves as coal miners, but often as farmers who sometimes mined coal. As individualistic as some of these workers were, they did not dismiss collective action out of hand. They understood what it could achieve. Various factors helped to determine whether an individual remained in a union, joined a union, or refused to do so in the first place. These workers weighed their own interests and made calculated decisions about unionism. In many respects, these part-time coal miners bear similarities to harvest hands, timber workers, and other semi-skilled workers in other rural areas of the country.

Caldemeyer sets the stage with an examination of the suspicions and concerns of Gilded Age farmers and workers. The 1890s in particular brought economic turmoil and political dysfunction. Corruption throughout society—including in farm and worker organizations—produced a great deal of mistrust among the rural and urban working classes. That mistrust spilled over to coal miners' unions. Not only could miners be cheated by coal companies, but neither could their labor unions always be expected to run in an ethical manner. Moreover, labor union officials had difficulty recruiting members when many workers saw themselves as taking advantage of employment in the mines when their own farms or trades were proving financially inadequate. Even those sympathetic to the unions often found their hopes crushed. Efforts to create a national labor union across American coal mining resulted in fragmented organizing between the Knights of Labor and the United Mine Workers (UMW). For those who did join, conflicts between union leaders and the rank and file over decisions to strike or not to strike could often have disastrous consequences. The abortive 1891 nationwide strike by the UMW created significant disillusionment among the membership of the new industrial union, for example.

One of the most interesting features of *Union Renegades* is its treatment of race, ethnicity, and gender. Caldemeyer explores the perspective of the rank and file on issues regarding Black and non-English-speaking miners, especially through various articles and letters to the editor written by coal miners. While plenty of divisions existed between coal miners and union officials, divisions also existed between the white, native-born miners and their immigrant and nonwhite counterparts. Although the UMW preached an inclusive message, many Black and immigrant coal miners experienced discrimination not only in the coal mines but in the union as well. Caldemeyer shows that many Black workers could join the UMW but nevertheless never felt that the union was really theirs; the wives of white coal miners, however—who could not join—were treated well and often felt a close personal attachment to the union.

As with all large unions, conflicts between national leadership and the rank and file undermined widespread solidarity. The UMW certainly suffered such division throughout the first decade of the union's existence. Centralized leadership frequently adopted different perspectives and a different agenda than the members of various locals. Tactical disagreements, such as the one that led to the aborted 1894 strike, proved difficult to overcome. Rank and file workers, meanwhile, looked warily at officials who benefited from union wages separate from what union members negotiated with mining firms.

Caldemeyer challenges some of the accepted historiography by focusing on the internal fracturing of coal miner unions and exposes members' concerns with their elected officials. She shows in meticulous detail that union members wanted unions that not only spoke to their interests but could also be trusted by the members. In the end, Caldemeyer provides readers with a quick-paced and compelling monograph. While targeted to students and scholars, Caldemeyer's accessible writing style should also lend appeal to a general audience interested in midwestern history, labor organizing, or coal mining.