

Book review

Lessons from the 1937 Little Steel strike in the US

The Last Great Strike: Little Steel, the CIO, and the Struggle for Labor Rights in New Deal America, by Ahmed White

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23 January 2017

The Last Great Strike: Little Steel, the CIO, and the Struggle for Labor Rights in New Deal America, by Ahmed White, University of California Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-0520285613.

Given its size, violence, and political importance, it might seem strange that the Little Steel Strike of 1937 is so forgotten.

In the midst of the Great Depression, 80,000 steelworkers went out on strike in a swath of industrial America stretching from Chicago to central Pennsylvania, defying some of the world's most viciously antiunion corporations in a bitter fight for recognition of their right to organize in the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), one of the divisions of the new Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO—later Congress of Industrial Organizations).

The owners of “Little Steel”—the moniker given to US Steel's competitors Republic Steel, Youngstown Sheet & Tube Company, and Inland Steel—and their pawns in state and local government, met the workers with savage violence, killing 18, including 10 at the notorious Memorial Day Massacre of peacefully demonstrating strikers gunned down by the Chicago Police Department. The steelworkers were ultimately defeated, but not for lack of fight.

If the Little Steel Strike has been ignored, it is perhaps because it does not fit the standard narrative of American labor history.

In that story, Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt, with his New Deal, embarked on the path of liberal reformism, first granting and then enforcing workers' right to join unions, while putting in place measures to lessen suffering in the Great Depression. Early in 1937 the sit-down factory occupations at Flint brought the CIO's United Auto Workers (UAW) division victory over General Motors, the world's largest corporation and a bastion of the antiunion “open shop.” That win encouraged the capitulation of the world's second largest corporation, the equally antiunion United States Steel, without a fight. Then, the 1930s courtship between the ascendant CIO and the Democratic Party gave way to marriage in the labor-corporate-government collaboration of World War II, with happy results for American workers. Or so the story goes.

The bloody defeat of the Little Steel Strike simply doesn't fit this scheme. It instead raises fundamental questions that still warrant careful consideration: How was the CIO defeated, so soon after its victories over the titans GM and US Steel? Why did the steelworkers lose in spite of their militancy and solidarity? And how is it possible that the strike was so brutally crushed with “friends of labor” like Roosevelt in the White House and in control of governors' mansions in Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and

Michigan, and city hall in Chicago?

The strike has finally found a worthy historian in Ahmed White, a professor at the University of Colorado School of Law. If White does not fully answer all of these questions, he deserves praise for breaking through the academic silence surrounding the Little Steel Strike, and for a thoroughly researched and honestly presented account of this bloody struggle. This is an important book.

The immediate issue in the Little Steel Strike was union recognition—which at that time meant workers' elemental striving to organize along class lines in the plants. In his first chapters, White tells the long history of this struggle in the steel industry, dating back to the 19th century when steel barons like Andrew Carnegie sought to break workers' influence over the production process, which had been wielded through the craft unions.

The skilled tradesmen and their unions ceded this only after years of bitter struggle, encompassing episodes like the great Homestead Strike of 1892, in which workers engaged in quasi-military engagements with strikebreakers, police and Pinkerton “private detective” agents. Labor militancy was not enough. The old unions were mismatched to the new forms of production that had dramatically increased the scope and complexity of production—and the sheer size of capital. White notes that by 1892, Carnegie's empire *by itself* produced half as much steel as Great Britain; and when, in 1901, Carnegie sold his interests to J.P. Morgan, the resulting behemoth, US Steel, accounted for, *by itself*, seven percent of US gross national product.

The old craft unions, which organized labor according to skill, breaking workers up by their various jobs in industry, were largely rooted out of the steel plants by the first years of the last century, victims of a merciless corporate offensive and technological changes that dramatically increased the number of unskilled or “industrial” workers, most of whom were recent immigrants from Europe, and later black migrants from the US South. “Steel was more than a name for various alloys of iron,” as White puts it. “It was a device for liberating production from the control of workers.”

The first great effort to organize along industrial lines—that is, to bring together in one union all production workers regardless of trade—came with the Great Steel Strike of 1919. Involving some 350,000 men, it went down to defeat in the face of heavy repression. But it was fatally handicapped from the outset by the American Federation of Labor's (AFL) insistence that the jurisdictional prerogative of more than a dozen

old craft unions, most of them moribund, not be transgressed by the organizing drive.

White does not say so, but that massive strike was dominated by socialist-minded workers inspired by the Russian Revolution, which occurred just two years before, and the pro-company newspapers denounced the strike as an outbreak of foreign-inspired Bolshevism.

With the industrial organizing drive defeated, the steel corporations, spearheaded by US Steel, put in place one of the most far-reaching spy systems ever carried out against a workforce, which White deals with in his second and third chapters. At times, “the steel companies’ power amount to nearly totalitarian control,” he notes. This dictatorship underpinned extreme labor exploitation and brutal working conditions that “generated enormous profits... The Mellons, the Mestas, Morgans, Phipps, Rockefeller—all these families built their fortunes on steel and steel labor.”

After the ruthless “Open Shop” decade of the 1920s, and in the very trough of the Great Depression, the steelworkers came forward again in 1933. The new fight first found expression in a massive entry into what remained of the leading steel union, the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers (AA). In the year that followed over 110 new AA lodges were formed and union membership grew from near statistical insignificance to 50,000. Between 1933 and 1936, a total of 45,000 workers were involved in 39 separate steel strikes.

White’s research here is important because it shows that, as was the case with other industries, the upsurge of the industrial working class preceded the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA, or Wagner Act) passed in 1935, and the formation of the CIO. The NLRA, which for the first time provided American workers with some protection against summary firing for joining a union, was the response from bourgeois political reformers to a working-class revolt that was already underway.

Though it initially benefited the AA, the upsurge of the steelworkers could not be contained in the old AFL-linked unions.

White explains, “With an innate opportunism rooted in years of concessionary dealings and ideological ambivalence, the AA’s leadership initially viewed the organizing efforts as an occasion to collect more fees and dues, but it quickly came to oppose the movement as a threat.” Union President Michael Tighe, whom the author describes as a “dull and reactionary man” and whom historian Irving Bernstein described as “barely above the level of literacy,” sought to suffocate the organizational effort by using the power of his office to expel militant workers and shut down strikes.

The venality and shortsightedness of the craft union bureaucrats presented an opening to the CIO, whose founding unions were industrial organizations of coal miners and garment workers: the United Mine Workers, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. John L. Lewis, president of the UMW, skillfully exploited the steelworkers’ upsurge to take over the AA and subsume it in the SWOC in 1936. He then handpicked the SWOC executive board leadership out of the UMW, including Philip Murray and David McDonald, who would serve as the first two presidents of the United Steel Workers, SWOC’s successor. These were conservative men chosen for their personal loyalty to Lewis—Murray, as White points out, as an adherent of the Vatican’s corporatist teachings, denied the very existence of social class.

Lewis authorized a large-scale organizing drive, in which labor radicals, members of the Communist Party, and veteran organizers with battle scars from the UMW’s brutal “coal wars” figured prominently. The Communists were chosen, White suggests, because of their proximity to the workers in an industry where “Ninety-nine per cent of the men are socialists, if by that you mean one who hates a capitalist,” according to one industry expert.

While he attempted to manipulate and contain worker militancy, Lewis

hoped to compel the steel producers to recognize the SWOC without launching a national strike. This bureaucratic approach seemed to pay dividends, when, in March 1937, US Steel executive Myron Taylor agreed to recognize the SWOC without a walkout. This was followed by a SWOC victory at the nation’s fourth largest steel firm, Jones & Laughlin Steel in Pittsburgh and Aliquippa, Pennsylvania.

However, “Little Steel,” White points out, was little only in comparison to US Steel, which by itself produced nearly as much steel in 1937 as the world’s second largest national producer, the Soviet Union. And Republic by itself produced more than Japan and Belgium combined. Just one of its factories, Corrigan-McKinney in Cleveland, produced more steel than Sweden. These were industrial giants.

The companies armed themselves in preparation for the strike. Republic executives later admitted to purchasing, in preparation for the strike, “64 rifles, 552 handguns, and 245 shotguns, with over 77,000 rounds of ammunition; and 204 gas guns of all types.” Sheet & Tube was similarly armed, but had also acquired 25 “gas machine guns.” In the five years before the strike, the top five American purchasers of gas for chemical weapons—government agencies included—were, in order, Republic, US Steel, Bethlehem, Sheet & Tube, followed by General Motors and the Ohio National Guard. Labor disputes between the summer of 1933 and 1936 had already seen, according to White, roughly 150 workers killed across the country.

While the companies prepared for war, the CIO and SWOC went “all out to support New Deal candidates” in the autumn of 1936. “Unionists celebrated the election as another step toward a CIO victory, taunting the ‘bosses’ and propagandizing the results as a mandate for the CIO.” White adds, “Congress was controlled by Roosevelt loyalists and governors of the states that were home to Little Steel’s most important installations—Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania—were all New Deal Democrats.”

The notion that the Democratic Party would assist workers was also promoted by the Stalinist Communist Party, which, in line with foreign policy aims of Moscow, had embarked on its Popular Front policy of seeking to gain support from the “democratic” capitalist powers against Nazi Germany. As White explains, the CPUSA had significant influence among militant steelworkers, and its cadre, including future CP president Gus Hall, played an important role in the drive to organize Little Steel.

Lewis and the SWOC leadership, confident in their Democratic allies, also overlooked an economic change that began in the months preceding the strike—the collapse of the 1934-1936 economic recovery. Already, White says, “the first signs of the ‘Roosevelt Recession’ were manifest in a decline in orders for steel in May...” the same month that the strike began. The steel bosses were able to stockpile unsold steel, and required few workers to man the plants.

From May 26 until the end of the summer, tens of thousands of workers struck Republic, Youngstown, and Inland, which White deals with in detail in the book’s central chapters. The strike was characterized by the solidarity of the workers, and the extreme violence of the authorities, the most notable episode being the police riot that became known as the Memorial Day Massacre. (Powerful video footage of the demonstration, followed by the police murders, can be seen here) Massive police brutality took place everywhere, however: in Chicago; in Cleveland, Warren, and Youngstown, Ohio; and in Monroe, Michigan.

The official response to the Memorial Day Massacre and other police abuses demonstrated that the CIO’s promotion of the Democratic Party was a dead end. Roosevelt waited more than one month to say anything at all—at which point he issued his infamous “plague on both your houses” comment, condemning equally labor and capital, the murdered workers and their police assailants.

“[J]ust as problematic for the strikers,” White adds, “many liberal politicians...seemed conspicuously indifferent toward the incident.”

Chicago Mayor Edward Kelly, a Roosevelt ally, vehemently defended the police rampage. Ohio Governor Martin Davey, a New Dealer, ultimately used the National Guard to break picket lines—soldiers went further by assaulting strikers and sacking union halls. Over 2,000 strikers were arrested during the struggle.

While the CIO pleaded for support from its erstwhile liberal allies, it steadfastly refused to call forth other sections of the working class for fear of upsetting its alliance with the Democratic Party—leaving on the job even those it represented in industries tied to steel production, including the 600,000 coal miners in the UMW, Lewis's own union and the nation's most powerful. The recently organized UAW, in spite of being full of militant autoworkers, provided negligible backing for the steelworkers, even in Monroe, Michigan, a short distance from Detroit and Flint. In this way, the strike was dissipated and defeated by the end of the summer, about the time Lewis ordered the purge of Communist organizers from the SWOC ranks.

White is certainly correct that Little Steel marked a major turning point—it was, as he aptly notes, the “last great strike,” in the sense that it was the final struggle in a long period of US history characterized by massive violence.

However, it was a watershed for a still more important reason. The near-insurrectionary mass movement of industrial workers that had begun with the all-city strikes in Minneapolis, San Francisco, and Toledo in 1934 and peaked with the Flint auto sit-down strikes in 1936-1937 had already reached ebb tide with Little Steel. The movement, arguably the most powerful working-class revolt in US history, failed to break free of the Democratic Party and chart an independent, socialist direction—a fate ensured by both the leading CIO bureaucrats and the CPUSA.

“The working class stands before an alternative,” Leon Trotsky wrote in 1938 of the CIO. “Either the trade unions will be dissolved or they will join for political action.” Indeed, the organization of Little Steel finally came about not through a mass strike, much less independent political mobilization, but via the subordination of the trade union movement, in the build-up to World War II, to “the steel embrace of the imperialist state,” as Trotsky put it.

The United Steel Workers gained recognition in the Little Steel plants by 1942, one year after US entry into World War II. That year, White notes, the War Labor Board handed USW the dues check-off guaranteeing “the union a continuous flow of dues” and relieving it “of the pressure ... to engage in continuous recruitment.” Unlike the UAW, the USW was imposed from above, with serious consequences for steelworkers and their communities. As late as the mid-1950s, half of all steelworkers still lived below the official poverty level, White notes.

The hostility of the Little Steel capitalists to working-class organization in general remained undiminished, but, guaranteed profits uninterrupted by strikes during the war, they acceded to the official unions “under the present circumstances” in the words of Tom Girdler, the virulently antiunion president of Republic Steel. White notes that news of the outbreak of war in Europe found Eugene Grace, the president of Bethlehem Steel, on the golf course. “Gentleman,” Grace told associates, “We are going to make a lot of money.”

In a thoughtful conclusion, White points to the failure of the United Steel Workers to anticipate the profound economic changes that would emerge with full force after 1979 and the advent of globalization. Already in the 1960s and 1970s, emerging international competitors began to cut into what had been the US steel producers’ “utterly dominant” share of the world steel market. Then, after 1979 and the adoption under President Jimmy Carter of a “strong dollar policy,” the steel companies and the financial speculators that increasingly controlled them began to starve the plants of investment, and, simultaneously, to reinvest money from production into more lucrative financial speculation—so that, in 1979, corporation president David Roderick could say, “US Steel is not in the

business of making steel. It is in the business of making money.”

Not only did the USW union not resist, as White explains, it “actually agreed to substantial concessions on wages, benefits, and staffing ... and it repeatedly accommodated companies’ demand for more efficient work rules.” Union density in the steel industry fell to approximately 20 percent at the time of his book’s publication, he writes.

Not explained, however, but crucial for an understanding of this was the utter failure of the nationalist program of the USW and other unions. The unions in the United States, just like their counterparts around the world, responded to the global integration of capitalist production by abandoning any resistance and colluding in the relentless attack on jobs and living standards in the name of making their “own” capitalist owners more globally competitive.

The result of this for the working class of the “Rust Belt” is an ongoing catastrophe of mass unemployment, poverty, and all of their attendant social blights, in a region where brownfields and ruins are all that remains of the factories where one of the bloodiest chapters in the American class struggle was written. In White’s words, “South Chicago, Youngstown, Canton—almost everywhere the battle against Little Steel raged, weeds and saplings rise up among the crumbled footprints of old mills and through the streets where union people once protested.”

White concludes by quoting Upton Sinclair’s apt verdict on Little Steel: “The purpose of the strike is to teach you what capitalism is; to free you from the accepted falsehoods of your class.” To this we would add, Little Steel teaches the need for a political party that represents the interests of your class: to fight for international socialism.



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