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Review of The IWW and the Paterson-Silk-Strike of 1913, by A.H. Tripp

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Anne Huber Tripp, *The I.W.W. and the Paterson Silk Strike of 1913*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987. xiv + 317 pp.

Steve Golin, *The Fragile Bridge: Paterson Silk Strike, 1913*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988. 305 pp.

Only a small number of strikes in America's turbulent labor history have merited book-length treatment. How unusual it is then that two books on the same walkout—the 1913 Paterson silk strike led by the Industrial Workers of the World—should be published almost simultaneously. Even prior to the publication of the two works under review, the strike had received extensive treatment. While the participation of the IWW, the strike's length (it lasted over six months), and the large number of arrests (over twenty-three hundred, possibly a record in twentieth-century American labor annals) help account for its significance, it merits intensive investigation for three reasons: (1) the involvement of Greenwich Village radicals such as John Reed, Max Eastman, and Margaret Sanger in strike activities and in planning the Paterson Pageant, (2) the impact the IWW's defeat had on its hopes of organizing in the East, and (3) the bitter quarreling between the Socialist party and the IWW in the strike's aftermath, which made the rift between the two organizations greater than ever.

The strike itself began on 25 February 1913, when broad-silk weavers walked out to protest the three- and four-loom system that some manufacturers had established in the shops. They were soon joined by the dyers' helpers, who worked in Paterson's large dye houses, and by the ribbon weavers, who comprised the most skilled sector of Paterson's work force. In all, approximately twenty-five thousand workers participated in the work stoppage. While the broad-silk weavers sought a return to the two-loom system and the ribbon weavers sought a return to the 1894 price list (indicating that the strike was partly defensive in nature), the call for the eight-hour day served as a rallying point that united all workers in a common struggle. Workers remained out until August, when silk employees returned to the mills and plants without receiving any reduction in the fifty-five hour work week. The defeat dealt the Wobblies a major setback.

The authors of these two books disagree sharply in their analyses of the IWW and the Paterson Pageant; fortunately, however, the focuses of the two books are so different that they don't overlap as much as one might expect. Tripp provides a blow-by-blow account of the strike, and concerns herself particularly with the impact of the defeat upon the Socialist party and the IWW; Golin, although not ignoring these aspects, is far more concerned with Paterson's internal history and with the Village radicals' involvement.

Much of Tripp's exploration of the strike's defeat goes over familiar ground, such as the divisions between the dyers' helpers and the silk weavers, the IWW's failure to organize the runaway shop sectors of Pennsylvania, and the IWW's inability to raise sufficient funds following the Paterson Pageant. On the other hand, she offers by far the most detailed account of how thoroughly city and state officials sought to remove the strike leadership. By July the Socialist party leader and labor organizer Patrick Quinlan had been sent to Trenton State Prison to serve a two- to seven-year sentence; Alexander Scott, the socialist editor of the *Passaic Weekly Issue*, had been sentenced to one to fifteen years for criminal libel; IWW leaders Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Big Bill Haywood, Carlo Tresca, and Adolph Lessig were all facing trials; and even William Brueckman, the Socialist party mayor of Haledon, whose town had been the site of many of the mass meetings, had been indicted for malfeasance. Significantly, the most severe repression had been directed at Socialist party members, and Tripp stresses their participation in the strike and the damage done by the heavy-handedness of the public authorities.

Tripp's primary thesis is that the Paterson strike is of special significance because it revealed the incompatibility between the IWW's revolutionary goals and the immediate needs of workers. According to Tripp, the disparity had been masked during the great Lawrence strike of 1912, because that city had provided an ideal setting for the Wobblies' mass strike tactics. But in Paterson, where there were over two hundred small silk shops, the IWW stuck to an "all return or none" strategy, when workers' needs would have been better served by shop-by-shop settlements. By July the IWW had its hands full trying to dissuade the ribbon weavers from opting for a shop-by-shop settlement. Tripp provides a detailed account of the Wobblies' efforts to influence the Central Strike Committee—an extremely democratic and representative body that the IWW never fully controlled.

Tripp's analysis, though, is weakened because she looks at the strike from the outside-in rather than from the inside-out. While she is probably correct in arguing that only the charismatic leadership of Flynn, Haywood, and Tresca could have united the dyers' helpers and the broad-silk and ribbon weavers, she severely underestimates the long-term grievances of Paterson's silk workers who had been engaged in a struggle against dilution for over thirty years. At one point, she observes that "there was a general feeling of dissatisfaction, with some specific grievances held by groups of workers or by isolated individuals, which could be

exploited by skilled agitators” (74); in the conclusion, moreover, she claims that “the workers themselves were like pathetic spectators in a war” between the IWW and the silk manufacturers (238). In making such assertions, she neglects both the European backgrounds of Paterson’s workers — who commonly had been members of unions or radical organizations in England, Germany, Russia, Poland, and Italy — and the constant battles that silk workers had fought against the silk bosses since the 1870s. By ignoring these aspects, Tripp fails to understand why Paterson workers proved so receptive to the IWW.

While Tripp believes the strike revealed the weaknesses inherent in the IWW, Golin believes the walkout revealed the full range of possibilities open to the American left in the pre-World War I era. Far more sensitive than Tripp to Paterson’s internal history, he begins his account with a fine description of the specific backgrounds and grievances of the dyers’ helpers and broad-silk and ribbon weavers that led them to join the general strike. Describing the strike as “a way of life,” he believes “the strike itself taught revolution” (69), and his narrative fully captures the excitement of the constant round of picketing, meetings, and rallies. Ironically, as Golin explains, the strength of the strike also eventually proved to be its undoing, as the workers’ revolutionary sentiments and unity so scared the manufacturers that those who were normally business rivals joined together in a determined effort to beat back the challenge.

Golin, though, is concerned with more than the strike events themselves. As his title indicates, he believes that the 1913 walkout provided a bridge by which the bohemian Village radicals, the IWW leadership, and the silk workers could develop ties with one another. Already a connection had been made between the Village intellectuals and IWW leaders such as Haywood, Tresca, Flynn, and Arturo Giovannitti through common participation in the radical magazine *The Masses*, and through discussions held at Mabel Dodge’s salon. Most interestingly, Flynn had begun to participate in the Heterodoxy, a women’s club that provided a forum for a wide range of feminist and political concerns. As Flynn overcame her initial reluctance to meet with middle-class women, new ideas began to germinate in her own mind—ideas that she then brought back to Paterson and shared with female strikers in meetings open only to women.

Golin also describes the contributions of Margaret Sanger and John Reed. While Sanger’s experiences caused her to back away from the labor movement, Reed’s fueled his revolutionary imagination. Reed played a key role in the staging of the Paterson Pageant, in which twelve hundred Paterson workers reenacted scenes from the strike before fifteen thousand sympathetic Madison Square Garden onlookers. To Golin, the Pageant demonstrates how intellectuals and workers could cooperate in creating new art forms. He criticizes historians who, following Elizabeth Gurley Flynn’s account of the event, have seen it as contributing to the strike’s defeat. According to Golin, the Pageant’s goal was to generate publicity; in this, it succeeded splendidly since the program received extensive

newspaper coverage. Golin also claims that the Pageant “radicalized almost everyone who touched it” (165). Here, as in his account of the strike, he tends to exaggerate the impact that any single event can have. He also might have mentioned that workers themselves in ethnic halls throughout the country commonly staged their own dramatic performances that had both aesthetic and political purposes. In addition, he barely mentions that Reed sailed for Europe shortly after the Pageant’s conclusion, just as strike opponents began to make malicious claims about the misappropriation of funds. Tripp is on sounder ground in her belief that some of the intellectuals (socialist Jessie Ashley was a particularly notable exception) irresponsibly abandoned the walkout at this crucial moment.

Both historians follow their accounts of the walkout with descriptions of the bitter infighting between the Socialist party and the IWW that took place in the wake of the strike. The chapter titles tell the story. Tripp calls hers “The Bitter Aftermath,” and Golin entitles his “Defeat Becomes Disaster,” and both argue that the recriminations did severe damage to the IWW. Surprisingly, neither offers an account of the November 1913 election in which the Socialist party, capitalizing on workers’ bitterness at the pro-employer stance of the city administration, nearly captured the Paterson mayoralty.

On a wider scale, both authors might have made use of Larry Peterson’s important article, “The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism, 1900–1925” (in James E. Cronin and Carmen Siriani, eds., *Work, Community, and Power: The Experience of Labor in Europe and America, 1900–1925* [Philadelphia, 1983], 49–87). As Peterson makes clear, the appeal of the IWW (and other organizations like it) was limited to specific groups within a specific historical period; for this reason, it is doubtful that even a victory in Paterson would have made much difference to the organization’s future. Books such as these teach us a great deal about communities where the IWW gained followings, but very little about the Wobblies’ failure to make a dent in industrial cities such as Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago. Was the IWW limited by its lack of organizers? By its antipathy to organized religion? By the opposition of certain ethnic groups? By the strength of the AFL in certain cities? Questions such as these are well worth exploring if we are to avoid overemphasizing the impact of sectarian infighting on the Wobblies’ fate.

One thing is certain, the IWW will remain of enduring significance. Whatever its weaknesses, during its relatively brief life span, the IWW raised issues—centralization versus decentralization, reform versus revolution, local versus national leadership—that remain at the very heart of debates about organization, strategy, and tactics and that transcend the Wobblies’ own history.

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