

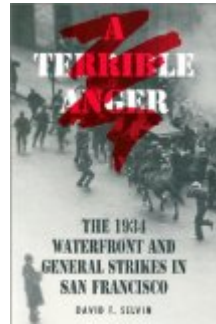
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David F. Selvin. *A Terrible Anger: The 1934 Waterfront and General Strikes in San Francisco*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996. 272 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8143-2610-7.

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A Terrible Anger is a narrative history of one of three massive strikes which occurred in 1934 which led to independent trade unions, organized on an industrial basis, becoming fully legal organizations in the United States. The other strikes, the Minneapolis Teamster's strike and the Toledo Autolite strike shared similar characteristics. In each case militant trade union members, led by radicals, launched strikes for union recognition against intransigent employers who were members of bitterly anti-union employers' organizations and who were in turn supported by political allies, police forces, and ultimately national guard troops. This is not an unusual story in American history, what was different was the unions involved emerged as clear winners in these often bloody confrontations. The end result was a massive restructuring of the United States' labor market which has only recently begun to be re-structured. Thus this book comes at a time when it might be useful to revisit the origins of legal labor unions in the United States.

What is useful about *A Terrible Anger* is that it retells a somewhat familiar story from a somewhat different perspective. Previous histories of the San Francisco strikes have focused on the leadership of the strikes and the role of communists or socialists in the strikes. Thus, this story can also be found in *Labor's Untold Story* by Richard Boyer and Herbert Morais (Pittsburgh, 1955, 1980) or in *Harry Bridges: The Rise and Fall of Radical Labor in the United States* by Charles P. Larrowe (Chicago, 1977). Selvin seeks to "record the impulses that led to organization and conflict, to see those developments in relations to their roots in the labor movement, and to review whole the tactics and strategies, the policies and programs that undergirded the real and enduring significance of the strikes" (p. 10).

What evolved in San Francisco was a series of conditions in which longshoremen and sailors had no voice in their job conditions. The work by its very nature was transitory and "casual." When a ship was loaded, or unloaded, the work was done and the employees were let go and then rehired when another ship docked. Although casual laborers, they were paid more than those with steady jobs. The way work was distributed, however, became a major grievance.

Some workers worked extremely long hours for short intense periods while others got very little work. Larger shipping companies with steady operations offered some employees "almost steady" labor in what were called "star gangs." Harry Bridges, who eventually became the central leader of the strike and the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) was a member of a star gang. These gangs got most of the work, "the best jobs, the best hatches, and the longest shifts." Fear of losing their jobs kept them quiet about work conditions.

As one longshoremen recalled, he left San Francisco at 7:00 a.m., worked all day, and returned home at 3:30 a.m. with orders to report to Alameda again at seven the next morning. As he said "So I never showed up. It was just too much ... you work up a terrible anger against the employers" (p. 39). The people who determined which employees would work were called walking or gang bosses. Given the surplus of employees relative to jobs it was almost inevitable that they could on occasion demand kickbacks or commissions for hiring individuals. Naturally, these conditions led to the central demand of the strikes; union hiring halls where work was awarded based on seniority. This was also the ma-

job sticking point in the negotiations and was ultimately the central issue which needed to be resolved during the general strike.

A central part of this story is the violence which occurred during the strike, in which several workers were killed. When two longshoremen died and a third was wounded in what could be described as a police riot, a mass funeral set the stage for the San Francisco general strike. The city was shut down for four days as a result of this strike. Unions voted to walk out in sympathy with the longshoremen and they were joined by large numbers of workers from other affiliations. This elevated what had been a serious, but local strike, to national and international attention.

In tracing the roots of the violence which erupted in the course of the strike Sevlín asserts the following, "Strike violence is almost invariably the product of a clash between two, sharply conflicting powerfully asserted rights" (p. 92). This strike pitted the employers' right to "unfettered use of his property" against the strikers' assertion of "a proprietary interest" in their jobs. They did not quit their jobs but withheld their labor in order to "concentrate attention on their grievances and to negotiate some amelioration" (pp. 92-93). This is one of the more interesting points raised by this history—that underlying these massive labor struggles were two conflicting property rights regimes.

Sevlín is the only historian of this period whom I have been able to find who makes this assertion. (Others approach this as an issue of management's right to direct the workforce following union recognition.) Sevlín's point is a logical one in that the legal doctrine underlying most employment law in the United States is "employment at will." Employers have the right to hire and fire without explaining why they make their decisions. One exception to this doctrine is workers covered under union contracts. Under these contracts employers must demonstrate "just cause" for terminating an employee. (Another exception, of course, is tenured faculty.) Unfortunately this statement is not footnoted and is simply asserted. Was this the view of the strikers? Or are there other sources for this statement?

A second question is why these strikers, and the others during this year, were largely successful while historically most, if not all strikes which reached this level had previously failed. Sevlín cites two interesting points. One, as might be expected, is that the Roosevelt administration was unwilling to intervene on the side of the employers to the same extent previous administrations

had. As Sevlín points out this does not appear to have been a foregone conclusion.

Roosevelt was on vacation during the general strike and the "acting president," Secretary of State Cordell Hull, along with Attorney General Homer S. Cummings thought the National Guard and the U.S. Army be used to put down the strike. The Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, told them that she felt it was, "unwise to begin the Roosevelt administration by shooting it out with working people" (p. 179). She also suggested that the President be consulted. Roosevelt, fishing in the Pacific, suggested that an offer to arbitrate be made in his name—an offer which was eventually never made. In any case what can be said is that the federal government did not effectively intervene on the side of employers.

Second, Sevlín points to the tactics employed by the leaders of the general strike. The strikers never resorted to out and out violent resistance. They met attempts to move strikebreakers or cargo with mass demonstrations and stones, but they did not riot. Their cause, especially in the aftermath of the shootings and the funeral for the dead strikers, was taken up by other unions and employees in a general strike. The general strike itself was a protest against the intransigence of the employers and the violence directed against the strikers. It was of limited duration and had the clear and limited aim of bringing the waterfront employers to accept arbitration of unresolved issues such as the union hiring hall. Unlike European general strikes, launched in efforts to achieve political power, this general strike was a mass protest aimed at changing the violent direction of the waterfront strikes. In this it was brilliantly successful.

A word should be said about the style of the book. Those who like their narrative histories to have a beginning, a middle and an end may be disappointed. Sevlín's first chapter begins with the funeral of the strikers and then moves on to beginning, middle and end. I found this to be somewhat irritating. A second problem, at least for those of us used to reading scholarly works, is the purple prose he at times uses. As an example of this in describing the funeral of the striking workers he writes, "Above the clamor of that strike-turbulent summer of 1934, the silence was a wrenching cry of pain and anger" (p. 11). I found some of the prose and the structure of the book to be difficult to wade through in order to get to the relevant story.

Perhaps the primary value of this book is that it gives one an insight into the turbulence of the period and that this turbulence was not simply the result of socialist and

communist leadership. Rather it reflected a mass radicalization of large numbers of people who came to believe in the necessity of workplace reforms that gave them a greater voice in their employment. Further, they believed that these reforms could ameliorate the harsh conditions of the Great Depression and extend democracy into another sphere of American life.

As to the overall value of this book, I quite naturally found myself referring back to Colin Gordon's, *New Deals* (New York, 1994), and found that *A Terrible Anger* gave me a deeper understanding of many of the points Gordon makes. Examples of these include the administration of Section 7A) of the National Recovery Act (NRA) Codes; the role of NRA director, General Forest Johnson;

the chaos within the Roosevelt administration during the National Recovery Act period; and the increasingly narrow options management faced concerning labor relations during this period.

(David F. Selvin was the editor of *Northern California Labor* and author of *A Place in the Sun: History of California Labor*, *The Other San Francisco*, and *The Thundering Voice of John L. Lewis*.)

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