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Nigel Anthony Sellars. *Oil, Wheat, and Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World in Oklahoma, 1905-1930.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998. xiii + 298 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3005-7.

Reviewed by Anne B. W. Effland (Economic Research Service, USDA)

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For many, industrial unionism will evoke urban images of auto plants, steel mills, and textile factories. But industrial organizing has embraced the rural world as well, reaching out to disaffected workers in such industries as timber, mining, oil, and agriculture. Seasonal and frequently migratory, these workers often live in isolated company towns or camps, often with little attachment to nearby rural communities. In the early years of the twentieth century, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) recognized the need and likely radicalism of such workers and pioneered in organizing these often-overlooked members of the working class.

In *Oil, Wheat, and Wobblies*, Nigel Anthony Sellars focuses readers on this effort with a history of IWW organizing in early twentieth-century Oklahoma. According to Sellars, Oklahoma is a natural site for examining IWW organizing at the local level. He characterizes Oklahoma as a "wage-workers frontier" where low-skilled labor in migratory and seasonal jobs was exploited in intensely competitive industries, including agriculture, that were in the process of restructuring into fewer, more concentrated corporations. Sellars also identifies a parallel between the resistance of Oklahoma's traditional labor unions, agrarian Populists, and Socialists to "the new economic order," and the IWW's ideology of industrial unionism and direct action to achieve workers' control.

Although a fairly traditional labor history, the story is made more broadly meaningful than the typical state-bounded study by its attention to workers in two particular industries, wheat and oil. The narrative is roughly chronological and covers the whole range of IWW activities in Oklahoma from 1905 to 1930, but it focuses particularly on the IWW's organizing efforts among wheat harvest laborers and oil field crews from 1915 to 1923.

Sellars examines the growth of the IWW's agricultural union in Oklahoma's wheat belt from 1915 to 1917, then looks at IWW organizing among Oklahoma oil workers during the same period. The fairly successful wheat organizing campaigns tested such eventually standard IWW recruiting strategies as hiring roving job delegates, who were paid a fee for each new member, and aggressive job actions, including strikes on the job, while IWW oil field organizing encountered unexpected difficulties. Recruitment should have been easy–the work was dangerous, employment was insecure, and workers suffered from exploitation resulting from intense competition within a new, rapidly concentrating industry. But labor "agitators" faced powerful, organized corporate opposition, and the workers were transient, relatively highly paid, and concentrated in company boom towns where organizing was difficult.

From 1918 to 1923, the narrative recounts a familiar story of vigorous wartime and post-war repression of labor organizing and radical parties: for the IWW in Oklahoma, the scenario included apparent successes in organizing harvest and oil workers, followed by vicious attacks on IWW leaders, legal and illegal, from solidified corporate and state opposition. But organizers carried out a series of encouraging post-war campaigns among wheat harvesters and oil workers, led by the surviving leadership and focused on more immediate economic issues than previous campaigns.

The study includes an account of a 1917 tenant farmers' protest–the Green Corn Rebellion–which resulted from the IWW refusal to allow membership to tenant farmers. The national IWW held that farmers, including tenant, were exploiters of labor just like any other business owner and their aspirations to private property ownership contradicted IWW ideals of worker-ownership. Sympathetic members of the IWW and the Brotherhood of Timber Workers, however, organized tenant farmers, already radicalized by IWW rhetoric, into a union of their own. Tellingly named the Working Class Union (WCU), the tenants' organization adopted direct

action tactics in its struggle against state and corporate powers, and despite their refusal to embrace the tenant farmers, IWW leaders were prosecuted and publicly blamed for the WCU's activities.

According to Sellars, three trends or events caused the IWW's eventual demise in Oklahoma: increased vigilantism by corporate interests, the 1924 schism of the national IWW, and technological change in the wheat and oil industries. Among these, the last offers the newest insights into the reasons behind the IWW's failure to survive beyond the 1920s. Compelling evidence suggests that technological change simply reduced the demand for the low-skilled workers the IWW had been most successful in organizing, leaving the union without an adequate membership base to continue active organizing. The introduction of the combine harvester in the wheat industry, for example, reduced harvesting crews from 320 to 5, while excavating machinery and pipeline welding in the oil industry eliminated the need for ditch diggers and pipeline threading crews (who had been required to screw the huge pipeline joints together). Change in the wheat industry, in particular, had repercussions for the entire IWW organizing effort, since the agricultural workers union had supplied a large proportion of the IWW's financial strength.

Sellars admirably accomplishes his purpose of reexamining the successes and failures of the IWW nationally through detailed attention to its field organizing in the "industrial frontier" state of Oklahoma. He has produced a solid study offering carefully developed evidence of the effects of national directives on the local level, with which he draws conclusions about the eclipse of IWW organizing by other industrial unions, particularly the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). His work will be valued both by readers interested in a more thorough history of labor organizing in Oklahoma and by those looking for a more fully developed understanding of the IWW.

Readers with an interest in the story of Oklahoma's early twentieth-century radicalism will also find the study of value, since it adds a labor dimension to earlier work on the agrarian roots of populism and socialism in the state. For readers of H-Rural, in fact, this aspect of Sellars' work may be the most valuable, as a reminder of the full scope of rural experience.

Along those lines, the study particularly provides food for thought about the appropriate definition of a rural working class and the implications of that definition. The IWW focused on seasonal, migratory wheat harvest and oil field workers as the vanguard of a workers' revolution in Oklahoma. Most were not Oklahomans, but transients without roots in local communities. In fact, Sellars attributes the success of the IWW in Oklahoma to the labor circumstances of the industrial "frontier"–the prevalence of company towns and transient housing and the concomitant lack of long-time community relationships that in more established areas worked to foster less-radicalized alliances between small businesses and industrial labor. Thus the IWW definition of rural workers affirmed a traditional outsider/insider class distinction in rural communities, securing local community support for employers against the claims of rural labor.

At the same time, the IWW refused to organize the equally vulnerable, and radicalized, tenant farmers, whom they defined as members of the employing class. As Sellars points out in his analysis of the Green Corn Rebellion, the IWW failed to grasp both the powerlessness and the multiple identities of many tenant farmers–aspiring farmer, struggling tenant, seasonal wage worker–that frustrate definitions of a rural working class. Thus, the IWW could not harness, or control, the activities of these radicalized "farmer/workers," nor did they lend support to the efforts of a group who proved themselves among the most committed supporters of resistance to state and corporate powers.

Sellars suggests the IWW might have survived longer had its leadership been less ideologically rigid on this issue. But expecting the IWW to have been able to characterize tenant farmers as rural workers holds the IWW to a high standard. Appropriately defining tenants within a rural class structure was not an issue only for the IWW; Marxist-based class definitions that rely on a distinction between workers and individuals with ownership of the means of production (or in the case of tenants, aspirations to ownership) has been both fundamental to revolutionary ideology and problematic for that ideology in the rural setting since its inception. Although the IWW was at times a practical, flexible organization, it was also a highly ideological one; accepting tenant farmers as workers would have required re-forming the union's ideological foundations.

On other issues as well, Sellars concludes that the IWW might have survived longer had it been willing to bend or change its ideology. Such a suggestion raises a final question that should capture the imagination not only of rural historians, but also of all historians who look to the past as a source of insights about alternatives that might have been. Had the IWW adopted strategies

that might have helped it survive over the long term–organizing tenant farmers, embracing political action, or signing contracts with employers, for example–would its survival have contributed to a different labor and rural history in Oklahoma? Or would a changed IWW simply have substituted for successor unions like the CIO, with a relatively similar outcome for workers, including tenant farmers?

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