

H-Net Reviews

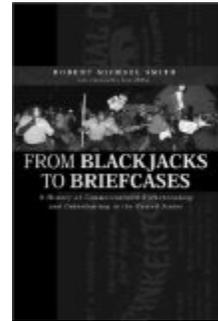
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Robert Michael Smith. *From Blackjacks to Briefcases: A History of Commercialized Strikebreaking and Unionbusting in the United States.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003. xviii + 179 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1466-8.

Reviewed by Rachel Howse (School of Archives, Information and Library Science, University College London)

Published on H-USA (February, 2004)



To anyone with an interest in the history of union culture in the United States, this slim book will be most welcome. It is a very readable account of a neglected area of labor history in the United States: strikebreaking and industrial espionage from the Industrial Age through to the present day.

The book is divided into four sections and an epilogue: “The Business Communities (The Era of Privately Paid Police),” “Armies of Strikebreakers for Hire,” “Spies, Propagandists, Missionaries, and Hookers (The Era of Industrial Espionage),” and “The Unionbusting Industry since the Wagner Act.” Robert Michael Smith, a professor of history at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio, begins by taking a careful look at the men hired to maintain productivity on behalf of large companies when a crew walked out—usually over meager wages—because of conflicts with management. Smith examines the early “informal mechanisms” of strikebreaking that were in place to maintain law and order during the nineteenth century (p. 3), and their swift, incredibly profitable transition from private policeman to that of corporate mercenary. Such men were not so much hired to encourage workers who had walked off to come back, but more to show them that the men could (and would) be replaced. The men who took up such work, Smith suggests, did so because they needed jobs; as strikes became more prevalent, the life of a strikebreaker became more exciting, particularly as tactics changed. The use of firearms, explosives, and clubs added new violence, while the use of detective work added an air of danger and secrecy, and began to push the existing laws regarding commerce and labor relations. Reaction to such men, Scott Molloy points out in an introduction to the book,

was varied, as “some Americans regarded the armies of guards who surrounded strike-bound plants as remnants of a feudal past,” while others saw them as representative of the working man’s right to choose his employment (p. xv).

Smith moves from a social framework to anecdotal descriptions of the men involved in the origins of strikebreaking through the likes of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency (which began in 1855), the U.S. Detective Agency, the Thiel Agency, the Baldwin-Felts Agency, and—perhaps most notoriously—James A. Farley, who would become known as the first “King of the Strikebreakers.” Farley would be replaced as “King” by Pearl Bergoff, after trying to break the San Francisco streetcar strike in 1906 that resulted in “Bloody Tuesday,” though Farley’s ten years in the business would leave him with over \$10 million.

Smith carefully reconstructs the transition in attitudes from a belief in the individual man’s right to choose his work to a sense of social responsibility. The middle classes had for the most part supported excessive force in strikebreaking. But, as Smith points out, “with bloodshed often the end result of their introduction and as concepts of a laissez-faire economy gave way to a growing sense of social responsibility, an examination of the roles played in the struggle between employer and employee became inevitable” (p. 62). This change in the value system of middle America, the move from outwardly condoning violence if it aided profit to concern over the ramifications of violence in strike situations, would result in a series of federal commissions investigating strikebreaking and would set the stage for President Roosevelt to push

through labor legislation in 1936, prompting Bergoff to retire from the strikebreaking business just as industrial espionage was becoming the favored way of dealing with tensions between labor and management.

Smith sidesteps personal conjecture as he guides the reader on an engrossing tour of the quagmire that was the anti-union industry, especially as it involved politics. The industry had been forced to become stealthier in order to survive, as violence and mercenary-like armies of men utilized to break strikes became pass=. In fact, the passage of the Byrd Act by Roosevelt in 1936 made the transporting of anti-union forces across state lines illegal. However, “[f]ollowing the La Follette hearings and the changes in capital-labor relationship ushered in by the National Labor Relations/Wagner Act of 1935, a new breed of anti-union practitioners quickly responded to the changing needs of the business community” (p. 96).

By the beginning of the third section of the book, the reader will have been exposed to well-placed and relevant primary documents, first-person accounts of anti-union tactics, including the use of the term “hookers,” a term not referring to prostitutes but rather to men who were lured into spying to glean information about union activities. “While operatives directly in the employ of these agencies generated most undercover reports, some were written by workers who had been duped, or in the spy’s parlance, ‘hooked,’ into the sordid profession” (p. 86). Smith’s use of the word “sordid” is deliberate and loaded with imagery that clearly illustrates how the

world was changing. What had once been a professional statement of individualism and a way to make a living had become a profession defined by deceit and betrayal.

Smith’s book concludes with an evaluation of anti-union and corporate espionage in contemporary society and details how once public opinion had slid away from support of unions, politics would do the same. By the time of Ronald Reagan’s second election in 1984, “union-busters were in hog heaven” and it would take no time at all for “men little different from the thugs employed by Bergoff and Farley” to once again become *de rigueur* (p. 117). Companies like Vance’s Protection Asset Team, founded by Charles Vance, a former Secret Service agent and the ex-husband of Gerald Ford’s daughter Susan, would introduce guerrilla warfare and advanced espionage tactics to union-busting, engaging sniper and explosives experts to increase and diversify the pressure that could be put on union organizers and labor activists.

Robert Michael Smith has provided those with an interest in labor history that which has been much-needed and lacking: an objective look at the anti-union industry. Though an academic work, the book will be easily digested by the intelligent lay-person and will encourage individuals on both sides of the labor union debate to examine the history and perhaps rethink their positions. Smith has also provided insight into an area of American socio-economics and literature that complements the fiction of Dashiell Hammett, tying the mystery writer’s work solidly to documented history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-usa>

Citation: Rachel Howse. Review of Smith, Robert Michael, *From Blackjacks to Briefcases: A History of Commercialized Strikebreaking and Unionbusting in the United States*. H-USA, H-Net Reviews. February, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8919>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.