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Many Americans are familiar with the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911, which killed 146 women due to nonexistent safety standards and the shop owners’ resistance to union organizing. Fewer Americans are familiar with the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), which sought to organize garment workers in New York City. When their efforts finally gained traction in the wake of the notorious fire, many garment companies responded by shifting the labor burden to “jobbers” who found contractors and subcontractors to complete the work rather than having clothing completed start to finish in one shop. As Robert P. Wolensky demonstrates in his oral history edited volume, Sewn in Coal Country: An Oral History of the Ladies’ Garment Industry in Northeastern Pennsylvania, 1945-1995, jobbers began looking for nonunionized shops in small communities with geographic proximity to, and lower wages than, New York City. Wolensky notes that this shift marked the beginning of the “runaway shop” and the rise of garment production in Pennsylvania’s Wyoming Valley, an area once known for its booming anthracite coal mines (pp. 7-8).

Wolensky traces the rise of ILGWU union shops in the Wyoming Valley, arguing that they were successful because the movement cultivated deep loyalty and support through the “solidarity unionist approach” (p. xix). A professor emeritus of sociology at University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, Wolensky grounds the book in sociology, exploring the interconnectivity of the personal, social, and political, but also incorporates labor and oral history. Specifically, he embraces the concept of “solidarity unionism” as articulated by Staughton Lynd and Alice Lynd in their edited collection, Rank and File: Personal Histories of Working Class Organizers (1973), Staughton Lynd in Solidarity Unionism: Rebuilding the Labor Movement from Below (1992), and Elizabeth Faue in Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945 (1991). As a graduate of the University of Florida, I was particularly pleased to see Wolensky credit the late Bob Zieger (John L. Lewis:

Wolensky coauthored, with Nicole H. Wolensky and Kenneth C. Wolensky, an earlier book on the ILGWU, Fighting for the Union Label: The Women’s Garment Industry and the ILGWU in Pennsylvania (2002), but it was largely an institutional history. The book under review fills the gap in the literature by presenting the histories of the people directly involved in the struggle, addressing the “theoretical and practical concerns” of solidarity unionism, and examining the “broader implications for the study of labor, working-class, gender, and oral history” (p. xvii). Wolensky provides a succinct definition of “solidarity unionism” in the second appendix, which states that it is “a grassroots, community-based approach to organizing and sustaining a labor union ... grounded in social justice, local control, and a MORAL ECONOMY philosophy” (p. 305, emphasis original denoting his employment of E. P. Thompson’s definition of a “moral economy,” which is defined on page 302). Sewn in Coal Country bears out these ideas. The main characters in Wolensky’s story are Minnie (Min) and Wilfred (Bill) Matheson, who introduced Wolensky to the region’s complicated saga of “one place’s desire for low-cost production (the big city) and another’s desperate need for jobs and income (the hinterland)” (p. xv). The selected interviews revolve around people’s experiences and interactions with the Mathesons and the role they all played in organizing workers in the Wyoming Valley.

The book is composed of sixteen oral history interviews, with a chapter dedicated to each person (one chapter is based on a joint interview), that represent the experiences and perspectives of the sixty-three people interviewed as part of the project. The oral history chapters are bookended by Wolensky introducing the topic and the region and concluding with an analysis of how Wyoming Valley workers’ experiences increase our understanding of historical sociology, labor history, and oral history. Appendices provide details about the oral history methodology, a glossary of key terms, and brief biographies of key people. In the preface, Wolensky thoughtfully suggests that readers check out the biographies in the appendices of each interviewee before making a deep dive into their memories and experiences in the subsequent chapters.

Sewn in Coal Country draws readers into the daily lives of the garment workers, shop owners, general managers, union organizers, and others and shares how their experiences shaped the labor movement in the area. As an edited volume, most of the chapters are edited transcripts of the interviews. The reader learns about the community tensions, conjectures of local workers and organizers about who may or may not be members of organized crime, strategies for recruiting members and sustaining membership through difficult times, and the camaraderie many felt as members of the ILGWU as well as other unions, like the Teamsters who refused to transport goods to nonunion shops. Their stories ground the theoretical “solidarity unionism” scholars employ to explain this kind of successful labor organizing in concrete examples from real people’s lives. As Wolensky notes, oral histories are helpful for capturing the “plainspoken and forthright narrative” often missing from the printed record (p. 61). Coal miner Angelo “Rusty” “Bill” DePasquale, the “muscle” for an ILGWU unionization drive,
 minced no words in describing the ILGWU president in New York—and nearly everyone he encountered while helping the local branch of the ILGWU organize in the Wyoming Valley—as a "son of a bitch." DePasquale’s passion and frankness not only made me chuckle as a reader but also firmly underscored the tenets of solidarity unionism and the role community members play in creating and sustaining a thriving union. His experiences and others illustrate the ongoing tensions between the central ILGWU office in New York and the local Pennsylvania branches under Min Matheson. The diverse narrators’ experiences consistently illustrate how grassroots, community-based organizing led to successful unionization in the area, even during periods of tension with the national branch of the ILGWU.

The interviews are interesting and provide insight into people’s daily lives and memories, but the book could have offered more rigorous analysis of labor and class issues. Wolensky nods to key theories and methodologies he employs, but he does not fully engage them. This may be a consequence of seeking to amplify narrators’ voices. As a resident of Pennsylvania, I thoroughly enjoyed hearing about a region I previously knew little about. Each chapter includes a brief introduction that helps guide the reader to think about certain ideas, but as an oral and labor historian, I was left wanting more. I wanted to learn more about where this book fits within those disciplines; what new ideas it engages; and what deeper lessons we can learn from the Wyoming Valley and how we can apply that knowledge to other areas, workers, or contemporary issues. In terms of oral history, Wolensky briefly explains his methodology and provides a solid example of how one can use the discipline to amplify overlooked voices and introduce new perspectives to the historical record but does not contribute new ideas or practices for other oral historians to consider.

_Sewn in Coal Country_ is a timely book during the “Great Resignation,” as some are describing the current period. It highlights what solidarity unionism looks like on the ground and labor activists may learn from narrators’ experiences about the work of grassroots, community-based organizing. Additionally, high school or college teachers in northeastern Pennsylvania could also, for example, use the book to teach students about major themes, patterns, and activities about the local community and its history. Finally, local historians, residents, and general readers of any type interested in learning about the men and women who shaped the Wyoming Valley would enjoy the book. It is informative and abounds with unique, strong voices of people who worked to build the world they wanted to inhabit.