

## BOOK REVIEW

### **American Labor Struggles: 1877-1934**

BY SAMUEL YELLEN

---

Samuel Yellen's broad panorama of ten great labor struggles is the best introductory volume to the history of American labor that has yet appeared. It is detached, dispassionate, concise, and it carries conviction at almost every point. It is the work of a thirty-year-old instructor in English at Indiana University, who has tried, in his own words, "to analyze the causes underlying the development, to disclose the tactics and policies instrumental to the maturation, and to indicate the contribution left to the total current of the labor movement at the expiration of [each] struggle." The emphasis in his book is on "the weapons of industrial warfare devised and employed by labor and capital, the role of government, the attitude of the local agencies," and within the limits of his material he has "tried to show the growth of the various ideologies and practices, the difficulties of the industries involved and the general trend of the conflict of capital and labor in the United States."

Thus the railroad strike of 1877 was a sudden and convulsive movement of defense, spreading from one industrial center to another like a forest fire driven by a high wind, and quickly burning itself out. The Homestead Lockout was a conflict of a far more intricate type, revealing that the strikers and their leaders had grown much more experienced, more resourceful, more vigilant in anticipating the moves of the employers, who similarly employed more varied and complex tactics to defeat them. The influence of that defeat, too, extended downward through time, rather than immediately over the labor movement, for it made possible the introduction of the twelve-hour day in the steel industry, with the consequent depression of working conditions throughout the country. The vast difference between the railroad strike of 1877 and the Pullman strike seventeen years later—fought with the weapons of the nationwide boycott and nationwide publicity on the part of the strikers; with more feverish propaganda, with federal troops and the injunction on the part of the employers—suggests the extraordinary momentum of the labor movement as it got underway. "American Labor Struggles" includes accounts of the Haymarket riots and the fight for the eight-hour day; the Ludlow Massacre; the anthracite strike of 1902; the Lawrence strike of 1912; the steel strike; the Southern textile strikes of 1929. Logically, it concludes with the San Francisco general strike, the most complex and widespread struggle in American labor history, enlisting the activity of workers whose immediate economic well-being was not involved, but who mobilized to meet a consolidated employer offensive against a group of labor organizations.

Mr. Yellen's conclusions are tentative. He notes that American labor history is repetitive—the same battles are fought over and over again—and that these repetitions are a sign of weakness, of the "failure of labor to learn from its own history." Labor leaders are a little like Chinese mathematicians who, because no records of their science were preserved, were struggling in the fifteenth century with problems that had been solved in the fifth. "It may be," Mr. Yellen observes, "that a political party . . . is essential for labor in order to serve as a conducting medium for what has been learned by experience." The precision of these few formulations makes one wish that the author had generalized more on the basis of his study.