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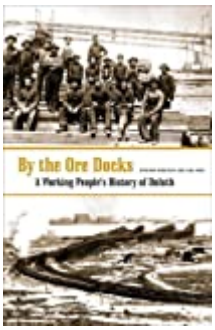

Richard Hudelson, Carl Ross. *By the Ore Docks: A Working People's History of Duluth.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. xxii + 337 pp. $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-4637-1.

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A Review and Discussion

Richard Hudelson, with research and advisory assistance from the late Carl Ross, has written a popular labor history that should be welcomed in Duluth and beyond. Those interested in the origins and struggles of the labor movement in the Duluth, Minnesota, such as labor leaders, shop stewards, students of history and urbanization and work and political influences will find interesting and valuable narration and discussion. Many photographs and copies of flyers and news articles give local flavor to the book. While people of Swedish and Finnish ancestry will especially appreciate the emphasis Hudelson and Ross give to their fellow ethnics.

Duluth, Hudelson relates, grew up on the western edge of Lake Superior during the emerging industrial era between the Civil War and World War I. Swedish immigrants arrived in the 1860s to join a polyglot working class in sawmills, lumber yards, grain terminals, building railroads, and digging and handling iron ore; the Finns arrived soon after, as did the Italians. The exploitive social dynamics of the Robber Baron era of industrial capitalism drove workers, especially the foreign-born, into unions and political parties in particular the Knights of Labor and Greenback Labor Party. Violent confrontations during strikes brought repression and sometimes death from police and employers, who also paid for their excesses as some of the strikers shot back.

European-born workers, who brought their own socialist visions of a better world with them to America, naturally turned to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) as the new century saw the consolidation of employer economic and political power. With national repression of the IWW during World War I and the Bolshevik triumph in Russia, many Duluth workers embraced the radical vision of the Communists. The Duluth Scandinavian Socialists and Finnish Socialist Federation, for example, joined the new Communist Party (CP) en masse.

At the same time there was increasing pressure for "Americanization." Evangelist Billy Sunday's idea, Hudelson notes, was to put immigrant socialists and IWWs in front of a firing squad. The temperance movement grew at the same time, bringing women more and more into the political process, but also attacking immigrants' traditional drinking habits. The resurgent Ku Klux Klan targeted immigrants and Catholics as much

as blacks during the 1920s and ran one of its members as a candidate for mayor of Duluth. The city's working class organized against repression, and finding the Minnesota American Federation of Labor (AFL) too conservative embraced new political forms founding a local branch of the Farmer-Labor movement, which, modeled on the Non-Partisan League of North Dakota, had taken root in Minnesota. The fledgling Farmer-Labor movement scored its first victory with the election of locomotive engineer William Carss to Congress in 1918. Communists got involved in the campaign and were accepted after some initial distrust.

The Great Depression hit Duluth, like other industrial areas, with wage cuts, layoffs, and loss of social services due to reduced tax revenue, so many turned to the Communist Party as well as the Farmer-Labor Party. Organizing and participating in strikes and marches and rallies gave CP members credibility among Duluth's workers, and when the Committee for Industrial Unions (CIO) was formed and expelled from the AFL, the CP provided CIO organizers in Duluth as across the country. Even so, the CP attracted many fewer votes for its candidates than did the Farmer-Labor Party.

Most CP members did not advertise their connection, but were rather seen as activists in the CIO and Farmer-Labor Party. Hudelson refers to these hidden Communists as "Popular Front activists," and gives a brief description of CP changes in direction dictated by the Comintern (pp. 200-203). CP members and "Popular Front activists" championed African American causes as well as labor's and the defeat of fascism. By the mid-1930s, however, the Farmer-Labor Party (FLP) was split on the Communist issue, and the FLP suffered defeats in 1938 from which it never recovered. The Popular Front, echoing Moscow's support for the Nazi-Soviet Pact, was for peace–except for the Soviet Union's invasion of Finland, and until the Soviet Union was invaded by Germany. Opposition to Popular Front/CP positions began to emerge in the labor movement. In the interests of unity a coalition was built in 1944 that brought the FLP, the CIO and the Democratic Party together, creating the Democrat-Farmer-Labor Party which eventually purged its Reds and elected Hubert Humphrey as mayor of Minneapolis.

Hudelson states at the beginning of *By the Ore Docks* "the impetus [for this book] was my own question about the role of the Communists in the history of Duluth" (p. ix) and that "what is perhaps different about Duluth is the extent to which this Communist influence was homegrown and deeply rooted in the long struggle for industrial unions waged by Duluth's multiethnic, industrial working class" (p. xxii). In his first note for the Epilogue, Hudelson writes, "scholarship on the history of the American Communist Party is currently embroiled in a debate between 'traditionalists,' who stress the role of the party as an agent of Moscow, and 'revisionists,' who stress the role of the party as part of a broad populist current in American history â¦The history of Duluth offered here would seem to support the revisionist perspectiveâ¦." (p. 321). He mourns the "loss of a radical perspective" in the labor movement while cheering its legacy (p.273).

What appears to have happened in Duluth, however, does not seem much different than what happened everywhere else as the Popular Front disintegrated and the CP became increasingly isolated. Hudelson gives us some of it, but not nearly enough to understand why anticommunism took such deep root and eventually prevailed. As Hudelson presents the storey, it would seem that a sort of knee-jerk redbaiting simply gained ground as American-Soviet wartime unity morphed into the Cold War. Hudelson does mention CP methods of trying to control meetings, which upset some people (p. 240), threats of violence in union disputes (pp. 241-242), the twists and turns of the Nazi-Soviet Pact (pp. 245-246), as well as the negative reaction among Finns when the U.S.S.R., with American CP support, invaded Finland in 1939 (p. 246). With the possible exception of the Finnish reaction, these are the same issues that set many people against the CP in many places, not just Duluth. As the experiences of Finnish immigrant workers are one of the book's main narrative threads, it would be worth knowing if Duluth's Finns joined thousands of other American and Canadian Finns in responding to the Party's call to build *socialism* in Soviet Karelia in 1931. And what was Duluth's reaction to so many of those Finns ending up in gulags or mass graves?

Most problematical is Hudelson's reduction of World War II to a single paragraph noting that "like the rest of America, Duluth threw its heart and back into the war effort" (p. 250). There is discussion of the attacks on the Communists from the government, the CIO and the FLP, and the last gasp of the 1948 Wallace for President campaign (pp. 254-270). There is, however, no discussion of the CP's role during the war, which set the stage for the post-war purges. What could have made this an interesting book to historians of American communism would have been an in-depth look at how CP members and Popular Front activists in positions of power in the labor movement treated their members. Was it different than in, say, the National Maritime Union (which had a Du-

luth Great Lakes local) where Party membership was almost a requirement for leadership, but support for the CP among the rank and file was amazingly shallow? Did leftist CIO leaders in Duluth encourage wartime speedup on the job to help the Soviet Union as did leftist leadership in the International Longshoreman's and Warehouseman's Union (ILWU)? Did Duluth's vanguard of the proletariat join the national CP and some of the CIO in supporting a labor draft? Did Duluth's Popular Front activists join the leftist condemnation of their former hero John L. Lewis for daring to take coal miners out on strike while the Soviet Union was under attack? With union ranks swollen by wartime jobs, did CP-influenced unions resort to bureaucratic methods to radicalize the new members, as did the ILWU's San Francisco longshore local, who imposed heavy fines for failure to attend meetings?

Or was Duluth different? And if it was, how and why?

By placing himself in the "revisionist" camp as an historian of American communism, Hudelson, like others in either camp, doesn't ask the questions that might undermine his preferred position, such as, did the CP in Duluth discuss sabotage with members in factories and mines in the event the United States and the Soviet Union went to war, as happened elsewhere?

While there are no truths in history, only stories, we are obliged to get as many stories as we can to find some balance, some semblance of objectivity. We'll never get it all, and our sources are generally tainted by their own institutional perspectives (i.e. newspapers, FBI files) or the vagaries of memory and interpretation. By allying with a particular perspective, here "traditionalist" or "revisionist," we exclude stories that are part of a complicated and richly nuanced whole. My own reading of American communist history, as well as my personal experience as the Finnish-Italian son of an imprisoned Red who was at the same time a founder of the National Maritime Union and a failed spy-in-training at Moscow's Lenin School, and my more than two decades as staff and officer in a CP-created union who saw a later generation of communists almost destroy the local, leads me to argue that both the revisionists and the traditionalists are quite right. American Reds were agents of the Soviet Union capable of spying and sabotage, *and* courageous fighters for workers, African Americans, unions, social programs and civil liberties–all at the same time.

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