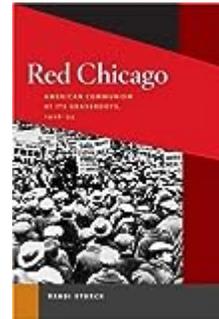




**Randi Storch.** *Red Chicago: American Communism at Its Grassroots, 1928-1935.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007. xi + 297 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03206-6.



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## Poisoned to the Roots

In *Red Chicago*, Randi Storch argues that to fully comprehend American Communism one must understand who Communists were at the grassroots level. Though the American Communist Party was a hierarchical organization that took the majority of its marching orders from the Soviet Union, Storch's study of Chicago shows that rank-and-file members were not always in lockstep with party officials. Her thoroughly researched study puts a "human face" on American Communism by contextualizing the experiences of party members. Storch contends that "American Communism embraced Stalinist stalwarts and their less-disciplined troops. This mix best explains the experience of Communism in the United States" (p. 4).

Storch examines the often overlooked "Third Period" of American Communist history from 1928-35, a time of "ultrasectarian" attitudes and actions. It was not a distinguished time for American Communists. The struggling party was generally alienated from the labor movement because of the dual union strategy, isolated from workers, and arrogantly trying to impose leadership on the "inevitable" revolution. Although the party yearned for

native-born industrial employees, the membership was disproportionately unemployed, foreign-born or African American, and male. Much to the chagrin of party leaders, Communism also occasionally attracted "unintended groups" like intellectuals.

Yet Storch shows that Chicago Communists in this era made strides that presaged the successes of the Popular Front era of 1935-39. As the country sank into depression, Communists organized in the areas hardest hit by the economic downturn. Party-sponsored Unemployed Councils halted evictions and restored power and heat to dwellings, secured relief for the unemployed, and improved conditions for the homeless. The party achieved notable popularity and organizing gains in black neighborhoods through these tangible efforts and local and national campaigns to secure civil rights. From a scant 650 members in 1928, the party grew to 3,303 dues-paying members in 1934, with high turnover obscuring the actual number who fell in and out of the party. Tellingly, however, some party leaders worried that these "practical" achievements distracted the party from more "theoretical" approaches (pp. 102-103).

Though Storch attempts to show that at the grassroots Communists made the party a more autonomous, flexible outfit, many Chicago members closely followed the Stalinist line and engaged in activities that made Communism unappealing to workers. The party faithful, steeped in a near-incomprehensible insider lingo, failed to recruit in part because they focused on the “technical” aspects of Communism and not enough on the “concrete daily issues” that appealed to many Chicagoans in the midst of economic struggle (p. 37). For instance, following Joseph Stalin’s decree that other socialists were “social fascists,” Chicago Communists spent an inordinate amount of time attacking reformers and Social Democrats. These leftists were viewed as insufficient revolutionaries, and were charged with being “socialist in words and fascist in deeds.” As Storch notes, “such thoughts and tactics convinced many that the

Communist Party was not for them and bolstered anti-Communist sentiments throughout the city” (pp. 82-83).

For urban historians, *Red Chicago* is an example of how to balance local, national, and international contexts through a case study. Storch’s thick description reveals how radical political actors used neighborhoods, workplaces, public spaces, and the streets to make their influence far outstrip the party’s minuscule membership, but she also contextualizes the local through an examination of top-down structural factors. Edicts from Moscow gave party members a sense of purpose, but the party’s paranoid, self-defeating hierarchy also limited their creative instincts and self-sufficiency. Ultimately, *Red Chicago* shows that many of the problems that plagued the rotten system of Soviet Communism filtered down to the streets and workplaces of Chicago.

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