

# H-Net Reviews

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**Dana Frank.** *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929.* Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press, 1994. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-38367-7; \$39.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-46714-8.



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Using the Seattle labor movement as a mirror to explain “why the U.S. labor movement fell so precipitously in the 1920’s,” Dana Frank provides the reader with an exciting, albeit disquieting, study of opportunity and disappointment. Central to Frank’s investigation is the linkage between production and consumption as barometers of class conflict. Although as Frank admits other scholars have looked at various trade union schemes to bypass capitalist control, her study encompasses the changing definition of such tactics in the post-World War I period. Just as critical, Frank also intends to integrate gender and race into the story of consumer organizing. Accordingly, Frank argues “unions’ consumer organizing tactics inhabited... a meeting point between the sexual division of labor in the home and capitalist relations of production at the waged workplace.” A similar concern is that of race. The relatively large number of Seattle African-American and Japanese-American workers, and firms owned by such minority groups, made for an explosive but also potentially unifying element.

Frank first highlights the almost parochial pre-World War I dynamic of Seattle’s small industry character, and dominance by AFL craft unions. However, Seattle did contain the seeds of a later radicalism with the presence of the Wobblies and their culture of industrial unionism. The war years transformed the city and its union move-

ment. By 1918 Seattle had become one of the principal shipbuilding centers in the country, in turn thousands flocked to the city to work in the shipyards. The migration of metal trades workers recast the more conservative labor movement to that of “radical industrial unionism.” This fundamental change in the ideological make-up of Seattle’s unions ushered in the famous 1919 General Strike. Although defeated, Frank takes the story further by showing how the respective unions remained powerful, and pushed for a new type of warfare to protect their interests, namely, laborite consumerism. It took many forms including co-operatives, the boycott, the union cards, and the union label. As well the ideological commitments to co-operatives (the bypassing of the capitalist system), workers were also attracted to the new schemes for practical considerations. As one observer put it: “if labor’ has enough food to last him for an indefinite period of time... labor will be able to win any fight they undertake for food wins all struggles.”

The consumer front contained crucial handicaps. First, women (both wives of unionists and as unionists) were largely excluded from the strategy. At best they were kept on the fringes of the movement, thus losing its most important adherents. Long excluded from union affairs, women were not likely to make the supreme effort of traveling further to obtain acceptable goods, nor

to pay more for them. Second, white dominance of the schemes also barred Japanese and African Americans. Third, many of the schemes were financially unsound, did not encourage democratic participation in the day to day running, and could only attract those in small industries. Finally, the vanguard of industrial unionism and vocal supporters of consumerism, namely the shipyard workers, had left town. By 1921, there were only “30 employed boilermakers,” when in 1918 the union claimed a membership of “10,000 to 15,000.”

Frank does not confine her attention to the respective contradictions, the author also looks beyond the boundaries of traditional labor history. Employer action in countering labor’s tactics are discussed, as is the red scare in diluting any semblance of oppositional movement culture. In turn, the union movement was increasingly led by conservative AFL types. Echoing numerous other historians, Frank argues that by the end of the 1920’s the “leaderships’ top-down, professionalized approach pushed the rank and file a little too far away.” That is, by consolidating their autocratic power, the same leaders found it difficult to mobilize an alienated membership.

Dana Frank’s study has much to commend it, not

least the lean and muscular style of writing. The book does much to lift the veil of the ignored 1920s. It encapsulates a period of promise and defeat, and the fluctuating quality of consumer tactics. The book clearly establishes that the early attempts at consumer power was based upon an oppositional culture that was quickly undermined by the swing to the right in the mid-1920’s. This shift was solidified when the more conservative union movement used consumerism “not as a complement to the strike, boycott, and ballot box but as a replacement.” At times the work does suffer from a heavy dose of descriptive analysis. For example, when describing union racism and sexism as key determinants in the failure of women and minorities to support labor consumerism, one asks the question is that the whole story? It may appear as a logical explanation, however, the book does not adequately embrace the voices of those female and minority groups that ignored the call for consumer boycotts. This criticism must not distract from a study that demands attention from scholars and the general reader. It embraces much that is relevant today: the critical need for cross alliances between gender and race, and the vital power and dangers that consumer tactics offer. Finally, the book goes far to answer the call for synthesis in the writing of labor history.

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