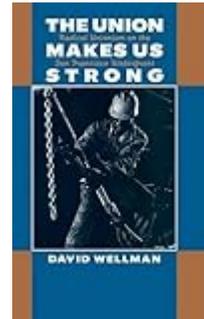


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Wellman. *The Union Makes Us Strong: Radical Unionism on the San Francisco Waterfront.* New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xix + 364 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-45005-8.



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Published on H-Review (February, 1997)

After three years in the field studying International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) San Francisco Local 10, David Wellman has written a provocative analysis that eloquently challenges seemingly settled questions about the decline of radicalism within American unions. Wellman's work deserves to be taken seriously. In a nutshell, he argues that the ILWU champions labor radicalism. In the ILWU, Wellman finds the contemporary successor to early CIO traditions of democracy that challenged capital's control over the shop floor. Although this is not a radicalism that can be equated with socialism, it is nonetheless a radicalism based on a consciousness of class that resists wage-labor relations.

The consensus view against which Wellman reacts maintains that after World War II labor abandoned its militant demands for radical social and economic transformation. It did so either because its most radical elements were purged or because its members opted for wage concessions rather than pursuit of an apparently futile attempt to force more fundamental change. Unions that are willing to act "politically" in accord with a radical or socialist ideology (p. 27) are presumed to be the exceptions in the postwar era. Instead, business unions, whose hallmark is pragmatic trade consciousness, restrict themselves to "pure and simple" unionism that brings home

the bacon and protects vital trade interests. Wellman argues that this obituary for radicalism has been written too soon, primarily because researchers have failed to examine the everyday practices through which the CIO tradition survives. Extensive field research enables Wellman to argue that he has unearthed a shop-floor militancy that operates through the union and its contract. It is radical, not by a mythical standard of "revolutionary organization," but within the CIO tradition of class conscious democratic workplace control.

Says Wellman, "The defeat of labor radicalism, the idea that unions have given up their fight with management, then, cannot be established by fiat. It can be determined only by looking beyond contractual language, formal organizational structure, and technical-scientific texts. Direct evidence must also be provided. The issue has to be decided empirically, not inferentially" (p. 32). Wellman employs the skills of the ethnographer to do just that. It is through this work that Wellman interprets the hidden symbols and meanings of the longshoreman's culture. Indeed, his work is exacting and revealing. His interpretations, particularly given his discussion of objectivity (a subject to which we will return) are, however, occasionally suspect. Wellman successfully argues that most researchers do not examine the "lived trajectory" involving the "actual routine practices in everyday life"

of the workers they study. This is the special contribution that social anthropological fieldwork makes possible. What Wellman turns up as a result of this ethnography is indeed fascinating.

Wellman has successfully documented a highly adversarial union that actively and rather successfully contests managerial prerogatives. However, it is open to debate whether that adversarial relationship should be called “class conscious.” Wellman locates his claim for class consciousness in the discovery of a communal longshore culture based upon fraternity, equality, and liberty: This is an inter-racial community in which men who share risky working conditions requiring extraordinary interdependency of one upon the other uninhibitedly refer to each other as “brother”; a union whose pay and status differentials are sharply circumscribed; an organization that successfully staves off tendencies toward political bureaucratization and elitism; and an association that provides unique liberties to refuse work. Indeed, there is much here that convincingly demonstrates a distinctive workplace culture, in which “an injury to one is an injury to all.” Moreover, Wellman succeeds in showing that everyday life on the docks involves active contests by the union over management’s presumed rights to direct work. The account bristles with lively descriptions of workers, stewards, and business agents using both their moral code and their contract to successfully challenge capital.

Wellman’s painstaking field work enables him to document grassroots practices that theorists generally either overlook or minimize. At the same time, however, his field-based empiricism omits important vantage points that have been developed by other research techniques. Wellman does not consult an economic literature that has long complained of the very practices he touts as expressions of class conscious radicalism. More significantly, his assessment of dockworkers’ power fails to reveal how or whether other workers might attain similar power bases for effective workplace control. Finally, although his analysis of the longshoremen’s contractual practices is astute, he ignores the legal and economic implications for radicalism based on such a program.

Wellman’s account establishes three bases for longshoremen’s unusual economic power. The first involves the union hiring hall, a result of the arbitrator’s decision that settled the 1934 San Francisco general strike. The hiring hall ended the dockside shape-ups that had been the basis of daily hiring by stevedore outfits. The “relentless competition” associated with that method of hir-

ing was riddled with complaints of bribes, kickbacks, and discrimination. ILWU halls held hiring practices up to the light of day and rationed opportunity fairly. In so doing, the union established itself as the “symbol of job control,” a position that was further strengthened by the daily contact the hiring hall necessitated between workers and their union. No less important was the fact that the halls effectively eliminated non-union workers from the docks.

The second source of independent power is lodged in worker skills and training. The skills of the holdmen, winch drivers, and gearmen involved in conventional longshoring create a space for labor to maneuver toward self-rule. By comparison, Wellman is less successful in demonstrating that the character traits necessary to work the newer technology of containerized longshoring involve “cognitive processes” that “make employers [similarly] dependent upon the workforce.”

The third independent source of power for longshoremen involves the cost structure affecting stevedoring companies. Wellman tells us that, “Profit margins in this industry are especially sensitive to ‘turn-around time.’ ... Steamship lines therefore want vessels in and out of port as rapidly possible. So do stevedoring companies. They bid competitively for contracts to load and unload ships, and labor is their biggest cost” (p. 211). This then becomes the focal point for labor manipulations of a contract that is not explicitly written for management’s benefit.

These conditions certainly yield the ILWU leverage that is not shared by many other workers. It is a power that enables longshoremen to receive pay well above that of the average American worker. Wellman never discusses annual wages, but average annual earnings for longshoremen who worked more than 1,600 hours (roughly 70 percent of Class A Pacific Coast Longshoremen) last year exceeded \$77,000.[1] Such dividends make it worthwhile to enforce the “ethical codes” (i.e., “working union”) that support the labor community on the docks. That solidarity yields a contract which, though it limits labor’s direct control over the workplace, nonetheless establishes legal cover for “defensible disobedience” in the nearly constant dockside work disputes.

The behavior Wellman describes goes well beyond filling in the silent spaces that every contract inevitably leaves regarding the contingencies of employment relationships. Instead, workers challenge what would seem to be the explicit language of their contract. According to Wellman, “San Francisco longshoremen do not always

work 'as directed by' or 'in the interests of' the employer. Disagreements over work are standard and profound."

The implicit challenge in this type of radicalism centers on the meaning of contractualism. David Brody gives a cogent summary of the shift toward contractualism during the New Deal:

"There is no argument about the essential characteristics of that system: first that the shop-floor rights of industrial workers would be specified rather than be left undefined; second that specification of those rights would occur through the process of collective bargaining and take contractual form; and finally that the contractual rights of workers so achieved would be enforced through a formal grievance procedure (itself specified in the contract with arbitration by a neutral third party normally as the final binding step)" (Brody, p. 221).[2]

Whereas the turn-of-the-century International Workers of the World (IWW) justified their daily resistance to management by rejecting the very idea of contract as an outgrowth of exploitative and bourgeois law, this is not so with Wellman's ILWU workers. Instead, these workers embrace the contractual arena. What they refuse to do is to assign agreed meanings to contract terms. For example, "What longshoremen call 'pay shortage,' the employers call 'left work without authorization.' 'Pay Shortage' for longshoremen is 'refusal to work as directed,' so far as management is concerned" (Wellman, p. 240). Within bounds, such conflicts are to be expected as elements of legal parrying in any complicated contract. The worrisome potential here is that the contract may degenerate into a source of cover for sabotage in which either or both parties become the contract's repudiators as well as its signatories. Certainly, many of the daily skirmishes Wellman describes seem closer to a game of "Gotcha!" than the quest for dignity and justice he concludes they are.

A manning dispute provides the flavor for some of the San Francisco port conflicts discussed. Wellman explains that, "The calculus of defensible disobedience takes into account possible contingencies, potential costs, and contractual/political implications." Union officials, says Wellman, must decide what is a "good beef," and what is a "bum beef." In the example at hand, staffing on a bulldozer had allegedly been reduced from two men to one. Under the Mechanization and Modernization agreements of 1966, union input regarding manning decisions was limited. Consequently the business agent decided to contest the practice by invoking the more defensible charge of "onerousness." However, the union had to find

a subterfuge to legitimate a walkout. When a safety violation was found the union felt safe challenging management's staffing practices. In the end, the arbitrator found the safety violation real, but the charge of onerousness was not sustained. According to Wellman, however, the dispute "gave the union a unique opportunity to raise the manning issue. With virtually no risk involved, longshoremen could challenge a practice that, on paper, had been settled."

The question must inevitably follow whether this contractual behavior can fairly be called an expression of class conscious radicalism or whether it is an opportunistic expression of self-interest. Is this "radicalism" not the same self-interest upon which capitalism itself is based? Have not the workers used their economic power, as capitalists have long used theirs, to benefit themselves? Have workers gained justice, dignity, and personhood by seizing this "cost-free opportunity to challenge the employers on a dispute that was already settled contractually," a dispute that Wellman finds particularly good because "Longshoremen were standing by and, more than likely ... paid for doing nothing" (pp. 257-64)?

According to Wellman, "Challenging management's right to rule the workplace is not a jurisdictional dispute based on occupational self-interest. It is an implicit critique of capitalist authority. It is more profound than job consciousness because the issue is not simply one's right to a job. Rather, it is capital's right to rule" (p. 308). Certainly, such challenge is part of the heritage of radicalism, but that challenge alone would be hard to differentiate from other self-aggrandizing actions if it was not tied more systematically to a larger critique and recipe for transformation. Wellman's account does not attempt to establish that the ILWU possesses this larger critique or recipe. Rather, it is Wellman's desire to show that those elements are not necessary for radical class conscious activity.

These comments are not made to denigrate the great advances workers or the ILWU have made, particularly as epitomized in the creation of a system of workplace contractualism. Instead, the object here is to deromanticize Wellman's depiction of adversarial relations as a radical form of workplace contractualism. Contractualism has definitely helped many workers make tremendous strides forward and served to place them on a more equal footing with their employers. However, unless accompanied by a progressive critique of labor relations, it is unclear how it can reduce the plight of workers who have less powerful economic levers to wield, work-

ers whose skills are easily duplicated and whose control over labor competition does not involve a monopolistic hiring hall. Without a positive critique or program, inequalities that were once based primarily on ownership are merely extended, as well, to inequalities based on favorable market position and legal protections. This is a step forward, but it is not quite an expression of a class consciousness that has a serious potential to radically overhaul class relations. At the same time, the use of frequent job actions to contest “settled” contractual questions threatens the central achievements of workplace contractualism.

In his fascinating appendix on field research, Wellman explains how he reaches his particular vantage point. He discusses the problems of objectivity, saying: “Neutrality or objectivity was out of the question. As a graduate student, I was persuaded that sociology was not a science—and probably shouldn’t try to be one—and thus I questioned the possibility of sociologists being neutral” (p. 327). This post-modern position left Wellman chagrined when his union hosts continually introduced him as an “objective” observer.

“Although I acceded to the longshore industry’s construction of me as a neutral observer, I did not, however, adopt multiple or pluralist standpoints. The social location from which the knowledge constructed in this book would be derived was the standpoint of labor. I adopted this strategy in order to produce a description that was not only factually accurate but deeply appreciative of subjective reality. To recreate the world of workers and their subjectivity required empathy with their position and the various attitudes contained in it. By accepting the viewpoint of labor, the possibility was created for catching on to the insights and understanding of that particular view of the world” (p. 328).

At once laudable and worrisome, this position helps

explain the particular constructions of this remarkable book. Almost any other position would probably not have enabled Wellman to get as close to his subjects as he did and to produce the rich descriptions he has produced. However, Wellman’s sympathy appears to have allowed him to close his mind to those “pluralist standpoints” that yield other interpretations of events. Wellman describes his relationships with the men he was observing, saying: “I was ‘tested’ on what I was learning. People asked me to explain what I thought I was seeing, and if my account was too limited, or in their view wrong, they would either fill in the details, or correct it. As I began to ‘pass’ these ‘tests,’ my relationship with longshoremen deepened” (p. 330).

Still, one older black worker told him: “You trouble me ... I’m worried about what you’re doing. What I’m afraid of is that you may use some this stuff against us.” In the end, that worker had nothing to fear from Wellman himself. However, the brilliance of Wellman’s account is that he reveals elements of labor relations that are seldom documented by sympathetic observers precisely because they do lend themselves to multiple conclusions. This, if for no other reason, and there are plenty others available, is a book well worth reading.

Notes

[1] . Pacific Maritime Association, *1995 Annual Report* (San Francisco, Calif., 1995).

[2]. David Brody, “Workplace Contractualism: A Historical/Comparative Analysis,” in *In Labor’s Cause: Main Themes on the History of the American Worker* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

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Citation: Daniel Jacoby. Review of Wellman, David, *The Union Makes Us Strong: Radical Unionism on the San Francisco Waterfront*. H-Review, H-Net Reviews. February, 1997.

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