

Three Strikes: Labor's Heartland Losses and What They Mean for Working Americans. *By Stephen Franklin*. New York: Guilford Press, 2001. 308 + xii pp. Notes, index. Cloth, \$23.95. ISBN 1-572-30477-4.

Reviewed by Kevin Boyle

When journalist Stephen Franklin arrived in Decatur, Illinois, in the mid-1990s to report on the strikes then crippling the town, officials at the Caterpillar Corporation refused to talk to him. The very last thing the company wanted, they said, was another "sad story about workers" (p. 4). They had clearly taken Franklin's measure. His book tells a very sad story indeed.

Trouble began in Decatur, a small industrial city in central Illinois, in late 1991. Caterpillar, one of the world's largest manufacturers of agricultural equipment, demanded that the union representing its blue-collar workers, the United Automobile Workers (UAW), make substantial concessions in its new contract. Negotiations stalled, and the UAW pulled its 1,800 members out of the Decatur plant. Caterpillar responded by threatening to hire replacement workers. The tactic worked. The UAW ordered its members back to work in April 1992, but the union also launched a guerilla war inside the plant, working to rule, filing endless grievances, staging brief work stoppages. The tension in the plant grew so high that, in June 1994, the UAW called a second strike.

By then, two of Decatur's other large employers were also engulfed in labor conflicts. In 1992, managers at A. E. Staley, a corn processor, imposed harsh new contract terms on their employees, daring them to strike. When the workers staged a temporary work stoppage in June 1993, Staley locked them out. In the summer of 1994, just as the Caterpillar workers were walking off the job for the second time, Bridgestone/Firestone, the massive tire maker, forced a strike at its Decatur plant by demanding sweeping revisions to its contract with the United Rubber Workers (URW).

All three companies played hardball with the unions. Staley reopened its plants with temporary workers. Caterpillar and Bridgestone/Firestone allowed the strikes to drag on and on, draining the unions of their strike funds and devastating workers' savings. Then, as workers grew desperate, the companies urged them to cross the picket lines and reclaim their jobs. Strikers did their best to battle back. They engaged in civil disobedience. They traveled around the country trying to rally public opinion. They tried to mount sophisticated corporate campaigns. They pleaded with the trade union leadership for help. None of it worked. In late 1995, the Staley

workers gave up the fight, agreeing to a new contract much like the one the company had demanded three years earlier. Battered by defections, the UAW ordered its workers back on the job a short while later. They did not settle on a new contract, which again was favorable to the company, until 1998. The Bridgestone/Firestone workers fared best. Their union, now subsumed by the United Steelworkers of America, signed a deal in December 1996. It cost the workers some significant concessions, most notably a shift from an eight- to a twelve-hour workday. But it also won some wage gains, which was more than the Staley and Caterpillar workers could claim.

Franklin is at his best describing the toll the strikes took on Decatur's workers. They had been loyal to their companies—many of them had entered the factories as soon as they left high school or the military—and in return they expected to be treated decently. So their employers' brutal behavior came as a terrible blow. They suffered from the economic effects of the strikes: they tried to scrape by with jobs that paid a fraction of their old earnings; they struggled to meet their car loans and their mortgages; they strained to hold their families together. They also, as Franklin describes, suffered from a sense of betrayal. "My husband hasn't lost his job," the wife of a locked-out Staley worker explained. "He just can't go in to do it. That's the frustration. They feel baffled by what's happening and the loss of their security. They feel like something was taken from them. They feel reduced to what they came from" (pp. 181–92).

Whereas Franklin creates a complex and moving portrait of the workers' world, his treatment of corporations and unions is one dimensional. Corporate leaders used the shibboleth of globalization, he argues, to destroy the social compact that had made the United States a high-wage nation and by so doing fattened their paychecks and profit margins. Union leaders, he claims, are almost all small-minded, self-interested bureaucrats, who have no interest in re-igniting the fire that made the unions strong half a century ago. Franklin's portrayals are not completely wrong: corporate officials often do put profits before people, and union officials can be more concerned with self-preservation than with the workers' interests. But it is not sufficient to point out officials' personal failings. Franklin also needs to acknowledge that businessmen and union bosses operate within economic and political structures that limit their choices. Investors pressure companies to cut labor costs, no matter how much workers may suffer. Labor leaders are stymied by a legal system that undercuts activism at every turn. So workers are not simply betrayed by their employers and their union leaders. They are betrayed as well by the American political economy. That may be an even sadder story than the one Franklin came to Decatur to tell.

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*Kevin Boyle teaches history at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is the author of various books and articles, including *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945–1968* (1995). His current book project is “*Sweet Justice: A Story of Race, Rights, and Murder in Jazz-Age America.*”*