

From Blackjacks to Briefcases: A History of Commercialized Strikebreaking and Unionbusting in the United States. *By Robert Michael Smith.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003. xviii + 179 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, photographs. Cloth, \$44.95; paper, \$16.95. ISBN: cloth 0-821-41465-8; paper 0-821-41466-6.

Reviewed by Richard Oestreicher

This small volume details the activities of companies specializing in preventing unionization. Robert Michael Smith divides his story into four chapters, corresponding to four eras: the late nineteenth century, the Progressive Era; the 1920s and the New Deal; and the globalized corporate economy of the last few decades. Each era, he argues, has featured a dominant strategy among strikebreaking firms: private police, armies of strikebreakers, industrial espionage, and sophisticated legal advisors. The story of each period is told through accounts of the activities of major firms as representative of larger patterns.

Private police services developed, Smith argues, because of the inadequacy of publicly funded and controlled police, the increasing scale of working-class protest, and public willingness to defer to powerful industrialists. Two of the most successful firms providing private police service were the Pinkerton Detective Agency and the Baldwin-Felts Agency. Pinkerton detectives infiltrated the Irish miners of northeastern Pennsylvania, helping to convict several dozen as alleged Irish terrorists, or Mollie Maguires, and the company provided armed guards during notable strikes in Illinois (1866 and 1874) and Ohio (1884 coal strikes) and for strikes at McCormick Harvester (1885 and 1886) and the Homestead steel lockout of 1892. Baldwin-Felts provided armed guards—really private mercenary armies—during a series of mine wars in Colorado and West Virginia between 1910 and the early 1920s. Public outrage at the violence that accompanied the intervention of Pinkerton and Baldwin-Felts operatives stimulated the passage of state laws limiting private police forces. As a result, the Pinkerton Agency gradually phased out its strikebreaking services.

Although the Baldwin-Felts Agency persisted, increasingly companies facing unionization looked for the services of companies that could enlist massive numbers of strikebreakers, or “scabs.” Smith illustrates this trend with the story of two businessmen, James Farley and Pearl Bergoff. Farley, the “King of Strikebreakers,” opened an agency in 1902, capitalizing on the experience and publicity he had gathered during his years of strikebreaking since the mid-1890s. Although Farley’s agency catered to several industries, he specialized in streetcar strikes, which were widespread from the 1890s until the 1920s. Bergoff opened the Bergoff Brothers Strike Service and Labor Adjusters in 1907. Both men hired the same kind of armed and professional muscle employed by Baldwin-Felts, but they also systematically recruited workers willing to cross picket lines. Bergoff routinely provided one armed guard for every fifteen to twenty scabs. The guard’s job was to protect the strikebreakers, escort them through hostile mass picket lines, and prevent them from leaving if they changed their minds. Both maintained extensive files with the names, addresses, and skills of men eager for the premium wages strikebreakers usually earned. Bergoff claimed to have collected over 10,000 names.

However, wary of negative publicity, some employers looked for alternatives to armed confrontation. Counseled by a more sophisticated brand of experts, they learned that they could prevent unionization and avoid public displays of massive force by maintaining an ongoing espionage and intelligence apparatus. These new services, provided both by private agencies and internal corporate security divisions, spied on workers, reported the names of the discontented, infiltrated fledgling organizing campaigns, and targeted union activists, who would then be fired. Such tactics not only aborted most organizing campaigns well before enough people could be rallied for a strike but also discouraged workers from expressing discontent, even in informal conversation, for fear that their words would be reported.

When passage of the Wagner Act in 1935 made many of the cruder strikebreaking tactics illegal, specialists developed more sophisticated approaches, turning to the services of industrial psychologists, hiring public relations experts, and relying on legal departments experienced in limiting the impact of federal labor law. While striking workers were rarely beaten or shot on the picket line between the 1940s and the 1960s, and no strike against a large company was undermined through recruitment of an entire

replacement labor force, Smith argues that these new tactics demonstrate that the era was hardly one of harmonious class relations.

By the 1970s, as unions grew weaker and increased capital mobility enhanced the bargaining positions of corporations, law firms began to specialize in maintaining “union-free” workplaces. Such firms taught corporate executives how to evade the intent of labor laws legally or to calculate whether penalties would be less costly than compliance. Some combined sophisticated legal and industrial psychology approaches with elements of the strong-arm tactics that had prevailed in the early twentieth century.

From Blackjacks to Briefcases packs a wealth of detail about strikebreaking into a straightforward and readable 130 pages. I could imagine myself returning to it for reference. However, its brevity and focus are also its deficiency. The book offers little analysis of the relation between these strikebreaking firms and larger patterns of social change, draws no comparison between U.S. experience and other capitalist countries, and makes no overarching argument about the larger significance of strikebreaking practices.

Richard Oestreicher is associate professor in the history department at the University of Pittsburgh. His book Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1894–1994 was published in 1986. He is currently completing a book on the relation between working-class formation and U.S. political and cultural development from the Revolution to the Civil War.