

United Apart: Gender and the Rise of Craft Unionism. By Ileen A. DeVault. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. xi + 244 pp. Photographs, maps, appendix, notes, index. Cloth, \$49.95; paper, \$19.95. ISBN: cloth 0-801-42768-1; paper 0-801-48926-1.

Reviewed by Robert H. Zieger

United Apart is an ambitious attempt to analyze the institutional dynamics of the emerging American labor movement at the turn of the twentieth century. It complements the work of earlier historians who have written about the labor struggles of this period, such as Herbert Gutman, Patricia Cooper, and Gwendolyn Mink. Ileen A. DeVault has selected forty “cross-gender” strikes in the tobacco, textile, shoe, and garment industries for detailed analysis. Invoking Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of the “series” as a means of thinking “about the complexities of . . . workers’ identities,” DeVault examines the part played by race, ethnicity, geography, concepts of family, and gender in the conduct of these strikes. Her aim is to understand the relation between each of these factors as they played out in local strikes and to uncover their effects on the institutional and ideological character of the broader U.S. labor movement, notably the American Federation of Labor (AFL). She concludes that race, ethnicity, industrial sector, and applications of moral economy varied with each situation, encouraging mutuality and solidarity here, proving divisive and contributing to strike failure there. But two factors—gender and the physical location of the plant undergoing a strike—proved to be constant and thus stood out as critical factors in shaping the character of the twentieth-century labor movement.

United Apart is not an easy read. The book is organized neither chronologically nor thematically. In the introduction DeVault observes, “The serial nature of the historical narrative—the fact that one event follows another—is . . . crucial in this book.” She further explains that her “examination of the narrative seriality of the case studies provides a sort of standpoint epistemology version of historical narration: the point at which actors stand in the narrative determines both their reactions to events and the unfolding of these events” (p. 8). The result is a presentation that combines comparative case study analysis with direct expository narration featuring extensive quotations from newspapers and other contemporary sources.

Employing this format, DeVault guides the reader through a complex agenda. Thus, the first chapter presents vignettes of strikes as a way of introducing the four industries, , and Chapters Two and Three bring in the Knights of Labor and the AFL, discussing in detail their participation in selected strikes. Chapter Four investigates the roles that race and ethnicity played in various “cross-gender” strikes, while Chapter Five examines strikes occurring outside the nation’s central industrial core. Chapter Six “explores the various roles family ties might [have played] in different strikes,” and Chapter Seven returns to the AFL to explore its efforts to adapt its craft-union orientation to the changing technological, organizational, and demographic character of work. The conclusion examines the origins and early development of the Women’s Trade Union League, which represented the AFL’s main means of addressing the numbers of women who were beginning to participate in the changing work environment. Throughout, DeVault makes heavy demands on her readers, repeatedly asking them to reexamine strikes she has described earlier in the book through other lenses.

Despite the awkwardness of the book’s structure and exposition, DeVault’s conclusions are sensible and well stated. An examination of a cluster of forty cross-gender strikes that occurred around the turn of the twentieth century in four industries located in a variety of geographic locales indicates that established labor leaders failed to make use of the energy and skills that women workers brought to labor struggles. While these men were capable of using craft, ethnic, or even racial categories to conduct successful strikes and build enduring craft unions, “skilled male workers. . . . could reach [i.e., usually reached] the end of strikes with the same levels of scorn for their female co-workers with which they had begun the strikes.” Male leaders “learned” that women, whom they usually ignored, denigrated, or marginalized during strikes, could not be good union material. Meanwhile, women workers also “learned” from their treatment by domineering male craft unionists in cross-gender strike situations that there might be “little reason . . . to continue or begin paying union dues” (pp. 220–21). At the same time, strikes on the industrial periphery, where local protests often created ad hoc labor organizations unrelated to national organizations, exhibited real solidarity between men and women walking the picket lines. The struggles of textile workers in Colorado, Indiana, and Oregon, and tobacco workers in rural Wisconsin and Florida yielded

examples of de facto industrial unionism built on this solidarity. In dismissing or ignoring strikes in “marginal” places, AFL leaders lost an opportunity to learn lessons about the possibilities of industrial unionism, even as their own half-hearted efforts to adapt the federation’s archaic structure and dated ideology to the emerging twentieth-century economy fizzled.

United Apart brings to light dozens of forgotten turn-of-the-century labor struggles. It gives a historical voice to local women labor activists recounted by their contemporaries, one that has heretofore been ignored by historians. DeVault’s appendices reflect her prodigious research into workers’ lives, values, and protests in the opening years of the century. They also are full of useful data drawn from the Census of 1900 on the communities in which the strikes took place and present a valuable guide to the primary sources she has mined. Her findings about the role of gender in labor struggles and the distinctive nature of labor activism in smaller communities add significantly to our understanding of the emerging institutional character of the AFL.

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