Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900–1950. *By Rosemary Feurer.* Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006. xix + 320 pp. Index, notes, photographs. Cloth, $65.00; paper, $25.00. ISBN: cloth, 0-252-03087-7; paper, 0-252-07319-3.

Reviewed by Tami J. Friedman

Rosemary Feurer, in *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900–1950*, has produced an important and engaging study of union activism in the first half of the twentieth century. Feurer focuses closely on District 8 of the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE), based in St. Louis, Missouri, and eventually encompassing some fifty thousand workers across the Midwest, including Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana. As Feurer shows, District 8, formed in 1937 and led by the openly Communist William (Bill) Sentner for many years, drew upon a rich tradition of earlier leftist and labor activism in the St. Louis area. Though it was badly battered in the anticommunist offensive of the mid- and late 1940s and finally collapsed in 1955, District 8 left a legacy that, according to Feurer, contains valuable lessons for workers and unions today.

One of *Radical Unionism*'s principal achievements is to focus attention on efforts by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to organize relatively small, peripheral employers whose financial advantage lay in their control of local and regional labor markets. While many scholars have examined the impact of CIO campaigns on major national corporations in the automobile, steel, and electrical industries, Feurer looks at three St. Louis–based electrical "independents" (Emerson, Century, and Wagner), as well as Maytag of Newton, Iowa, and several electrical and metal-trades firms in Evansville, Indiana.

Feurer's approach is illuminating in a number of ways. First, while always attentive to national context, she delivers a masterful account of how local employers and workers fought it out on local terrain. In vivid detail, she tells the story of modern unionism in the St. Louis area, including the Communist-led Trade Union Unity League's interracial campaign in the early 1930s to organize more than fifteen hundred nut pickers, some 80 percent of whom were African American women, and the UE's leadership of a 1937 strike by Century Electric workers, only 4 percent of whom held union cards.

Second, Feurer's inclusion of multiple firms and communities offers rich comparative material, showing how union drives, employer offensives, and political conflicts played out differently in distinct communities and firms. Third, Feurer's multifirm model reveals the importance of cross-plant solidarity on both sides of the class divide. Not only did strikes at some shops help stimulate organizing in others, but employers also collaborated through locally based trade and "civic" associations to combat the union threat.

Feurer also weighs in on a key debate about the relationship between the Communist Party (CP) and unions in the CIO. In 1949, the CIO expelled eleven international unions whose leaders, both nationally and locally, were associated with the CP. Scholars have struggled to explain how, in the late 1940s, Communists were able to hold leadership positions in the labor movement. Some have suggested that Communists hid their associations, because rank-and-file unionists would not have supported such sinister figures by choice. Others, however, contend that Communists were able to exercise power because they promoted a trade-union agenda that reflected ordinary workers' interests; it was allegiance to conventional "bread and butter" unionism, in short, that kept Communists in top union posts.

The story of UE District 8 fits squarely into this debate. Some of Feurer's most powerful oral-history material (and she incorporates her informants' voices with wonderful effect throughout the book) appears in her account of the anticommunist crusade of the mid- and late 1940s. Bill Sentner's supporters—including those who were decidedly not affiliated with the CP—made clear that they respected and trusted Communists who cared about working people and advocated radical social goals. As for Sentner's adversaries, they recalled that, even with the aid of such powerful institutions as the Catholic Church, the local media, and the FBI, dislodging District 8's leftist leaders was no easy feat. Indeed, even after Sentner stepped down in 1948, union members voted in a slate of progressive officers.

Sentner and his allies retained popular support for so long, Feurer argues, precisely because they espoused a radical vision of unionism as a "force for social transformation" (p. xiii). She rests her case on two pillars. First, she points to District 8's advocacy of "civic unionism"—or its efforts to link workplace activism to community activism and, ultimately, to regional and national struggles. And indeed, District 8 did

mount several significant community campaigns, most notably the call for a Missouri Valley Authority (MVA), a grassroots effort to promote public participation in postwar planning that was launched in 1944 and eventually encompassed nine states. (The proposal ultimately was derailed.) However, some of the campaigns that Feurer cites—such as mobilizing for national unemployment insurance in the late 1930s, or agitating for labor's inclusion in wartime economic planning—were not unique to District 8, the UE, or the CIO. While her argument seems compelling, it could have been strengthened with additional material about other community-oriented campaigns—such as those related to the cost of public transportation, for example—to which Feurer briefly alludes.

The second and related pillar is the radical democratic vision to which, Feurer says, District 8 adhered. Feurer argues that District 8's leaders built "one of the most democratic labor organizations in the country" (p. xvii)—or "one of the most democratic organizations of working-class life in the Midwest" (p. 223). Certainly it seems plausible that union leaders committed to social reform also would have advocated democratic practices. But it is not clear what "democracy" means or whether District 8 was particularly adept at promoting it. Feurer convincingly demonstrates that Bill Sentner was driven by democratic impulses and even disagreed on occasion with CP policies, such as the no-strike pledge during World War II—but other union leaders shared his views. Feurer discusses District 8's efforts to promote racial inclusiveness, gender equity, and a direct voice in certain managerial decisions (such as rate-setting)—but other unions pursued similar goals.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of democracy in District 8 was its policy—unique among UE district bodies—of electing district officers by rank-and-file members, rather than by delegates to district conventions. One suspects, however, that in discussing democracy, Feurer is trying to get at something larger—a sense of grassroots engagement in which union activism and community organizing were fused by ordinary (and sometimes extraordinary) people who wanted to participate in the decisions that shaped their lives. Through *Radical Unionism*, Feurer has opened up a whole new set of possibilities for investigation of how workplace and community struggles have intersected, then and now.

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