

Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950

Rosemary Feurer

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Growing up one is often taught that the ‘good guys’ always win. This is reinforced through Hollywood movies, television, and the media. However, unfortunately, reality is often different. Sometimes the ‘good guys’ not only fail to win, but are destroyed in the process. This is the case of William Sentner and District 8 of the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE). The UE is a small union with approximately 35,000 members. It is an independent union, as it has not been affiliated with the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) since it left/was expelled from the CIO in 1949.

However, there was a time that the UE was a powerhouse. At its peak, UE membership grew from less than 50,000 in 1939 to 432,000 during the middle of World War II and by VJ day, the UE had 750,000 members. As it organised thousands of new members the UE then built links with the local community. For example, in St. Louis during the 1930s and 1940s the UE Local President, William Sentner claimed that while the UE was interested in the livelihood of its members, it was also interested in the effects of their economic status on our community. In other words, where workers received higher wages, it was likely that the local community would be vibrant.

In *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950*, Feurer analyses the struggles between business and workers in the United States’ Midwest. More specifically she examines the rise and fall of William Sentner and District 8 of the UE. Sentner was a member of the Communist Party and president of District 8. However, his loyalty was to workers first and foremost. Under his presidency, District 8 often (although not always) achieved remarkable gains for employees and the community in the face of hostile employers. The UE is/was a progressive union that advocates such ‘radical’ notions as equality and fairness for all irrespective of race, creed, colour and political belief. As is the case today, such notions were frowned upon. Sentner’s (and other UE members’) links with the Communist Party and the UE’s progressive agenda led to District 8, and the UE’s, decline. The UE sustained anti-Communist attacks from

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within its ranks, (which eventually led to the formation of a new union the International Union of Electrical Workers) from other unions, the American federation of labor, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the Catholic Church, and the US government. As Feurer demonstrates, Sentner and the UE's only 'crime' was advocating justice for all. Unfortunately, this is not the only time in US history that radical unionism has been crushed by reactionary forces. Indeed, every time that progressive unionism has gained a foothold, it has faced a backlash from the government, business, and reactionary forces within the labour movement.

A minor criticism of the book is that on occasions Feurer uses the term 'social movement unionism' without a detailed analysis of the term; an all too frequent occurrence today. There are different versions of social movement unionism and Feurer should have explained what version the UE matches.

This criticism aside, Feurer's breathtaking research is not just one for historians. *Radical Unionism in the Midwest* should be read by anyone hoping for the rebirth of a more progressive-based unionism or a rebirth of the Left in general. Workers are central to the revival of the left and, as Feurer reveals, are subject to an incredible backlash if they are successful in, at least partially, gaining justice for all. While in the case of Sentner and District 8 of the UE the 'good guys' did not win, *Radical Unionism in the Midwest* should be read by the 'good guys' so they will learn from the past and hopefully emerge victorious in the long run.

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