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Review of Union Busting in the Tri-State: The Oklahoma, Kansas, and Missouri Metal Workers' Strike of 1935.

Arrell Morgan Gibson
University of Oklahoma

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Union Busting in the Tri-State: The Oklahoma, Kansas, and Missouri Metal Workers' Strike of 1935. By George G. Suggs, Jr. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986. Maps, illustrations, notes, essay on sources, index. xiv + 282 pp. \$22.50.

The National Industry Recovery Act (1933) and National Labor Relations Act (1935) substantially improved the lot of most American workers by assuring their federally-mandated right to organize and engage in collective bargaining. *Union Busting* reveals a worker community—the Tri-State District (Southwest Missouri centering on Joplin, Southeast Kansas centering on Galena/Baxter Springs, and Northeast Oklahoma centering on Picher/Commerce/Miami)—that was denied the benefits of that reform legislation. Opened in the 1840s, by 1900 this bonanza was rated the richest lead and zinc mining region in the world, and the industry it sustained was valued at one billion dollars.

Union Busting explains the Tri-State District's history of intense, sustained anti-unionism understandably supported by mine owners, but, ironically, also supported by workers. The author ascribes this anomaly largely to the persistence of the "Poor Man's Camp" tradition. For most of the Tri-State District's exploitative life, its scattered, shallow

deposits and simple leasing system enabled a miner to labor briefly to earn a grubstake, then lease a mineral tract and move freely into the mine owner class. However, on the eve of the adoption of the National Labor Relations Act, intensive mining had largely exhausted the shallow deposits. To tap the deeper veins of lead and zinc, mine operators were forced to install expensive, complex machinery and to hire large work crews, a change requiring heavy capital investment. This virtually erased the "Poor Man's Camp" tradition; most expectant mine owners became day laborers. When professional labor organizers entered the Tri-State District under the aegis of the New Deal labor legislation, mine owners were confused and uncertain. Worker plight was exacerbated by the suffocating effect of the Great Depression and drastically reduced employment opportunities in the district.

Union Busting poignantly presents the strife that followed. Agents of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers entered the district during 1933, organized seven locals, and sought recognition as the workers' exclusive bargaining agent. Company officials adamantly refused to negotiate. Union officials persevered and, in 1935, believing their following of sufficient strength, decided to act boldly; they called a district-wide strike. Operators countered by forming a "company union," the Tri-State Metal Mine and Smelter Workers Union. They served as union officers, formed their worker-members into "pick-handle brigades," and mounted a successful back-to-work movement. The resultant violence led the governors of Kansas and Oklahoma to break the strike by ordering national guard companies to protect returning workers.

The International Union affiliated with the C.I.O. and its officers filed suit against the mine owners for installing a company union and for other unfair labor practices. Hearings before the National Labor Relations Board during 1937-1938 found for the International workers, requiring reinstatement and back pay. The company union cleansed itself by affiliating with the American Federation of

Labor and appealed the NLRB rulings. Federal decisions upheld the NLRB ruling, but mine owners continued to resist unionization, generally succeeding by granting workers approximate union demands. This contest continued into the 1950s when it became virtually moot as the mineral riches of the Tri-State became so depleted that only marginal ores remained, exploitation of the field was no longer profitable, and owners closed the mines.

This saga of labor-management strife is cast in readable prose and comprises a useful account of successful thwarting of the federal will in an isolated segment of the nation's industrial establishment. The author humanizes what otherwise would have been an arid recitation of labor-management conflict and bureaucratic intrusion by including personal histories of individual workers.

ARRELL MORGAN GIBSON
Department of History
University of Oklahoma