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**Review of *A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* By Shelton Stromquist**

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*A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America.* By Shelton Stromquist. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993. Preface, introduction, appendices, notes, bibliography, index, figures, tables, photographs, illustrations. xix + 353 pp. \$16.95 paper.

The advent of the railroad had a transforming effect on American economic life and fundamentally altered workplace relationships. The late nineteenth century was an era of intense labor strife in the rail industry. A wave of strikes between 1877 and 1894 eventually caused employers, workers, and lawmakers to search for a fresh approach to labor-management relations. Shelton Stromquist has significantly contributed to our understanding

of these turbulent years in railroad labor history.

Stromquist casts a broad net in his thoughtful analysis of the tensions that beset railroads and their employees. He examines the different segments of the labor force, the impact of industrial conflict on railroad towns, the degree of class consciousness of workers, and the strategies formulated by rail management. Stromquist links the turmoil in the rail industry to changes in the labor market and the rapid westward expansion of the rail network.

Railroad management determined to control the labor force by reducing wages, revising work rules, imposing new promotion arrangements, and seeking to increase the supply of qualified employees. Workers resisted these steps, which threatened to undercut working conditions and to reduce their status. This conflict worsened despite a sharp drop in the number of successful strikes and severe penalties for failed strikes, including wholesale displacement of strikers and blacklisting.

Railroad management was not, however, dedicated to a single course of action with respect to labor. As Stromquist points out, rail officials did not give sustained attention to labor issues and were often divided by competitive pressures. Moreover, the rails did not rely solely on the tactics of confrontation but adopted various conciliatory measures, gradually implementing the seniority system and instituting company-sponsored health and insurance schemes to diminish the attraction of unions.

The great Pullman strike of 1894 was a decisive victory for the railroads. It effectively destroyed the American Railway Union, brought about a high level of cooperation among rail management, and legitimated the authority of the federal government to police labor relations in the rail industry. Anxious to avoid such upheavals in the future, leading figures worked to moderate railroad labor policy and recognized that unions played an appropriate role in modern industrial life. The Erdman Act of 1898, which encouraged voluntary arbitration to settle disputes, empow-

ered the federal government to enjoin railroad strikes that interfered with interstate commerce, and protected the right of workers to join unions, marked a significant turning point.

Stromquist concentrates on the western railroads, where labor conflict was most acute, saying little about eastern and southern lines. He perceptively treats the sometimes overlooked role of the railroads in promoting western settlement and in establishing a string of railroad towns to service trains. Carefully researched and persuasively argued, this volume would be of value to readers interested in railroad labor history, the settlement of the west, or the growth of industrial America.

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