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1996

## THE LEFT AND LABOR ON THE PLAINS AN INTRODUCTION

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Kaye, Frances W., "THE LEFT AND LABOR ON THE PLAINS AN INTRODUCTION" (1996). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1079.

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## THE LEFT AND LABOR ON THE PLAINS

### AN INTRODUCTION

Most electoral college maps of the Great Plains from statehood onward would show a fairly solid Republican band running from Kansas north. Most Americans, if they think of northern plains people at all, probably think of Archie Bunkers in cowboy boots so it may come as something of a surprise to recognize that the northern Plains has strong radical and labor traditions. Or perhaps it should not seem so strange. “Left” and “Right” are no longer firmly fixed—if ever they were—in American political traditions. One can now be “fiscally conservative and socially liberal.” Or, particularly in ethnic communities of color, one can be quite the opposite. One way to understand how familiar categories seem to break down is to look back at them with an eye to discovering how flexible they were in the first place.

This issue of *Great Plains Quarterly* is given up to two long articles that probe different facets of the history of the Left on the Great Plains. In “Workers, Unions, and Historians on the Northern Plains,” William C. Pratt surveys unions in Nebraska and the Great Plains with an eye to what historians have written about them, what stories remain to be

told, and what sources are available for the telling. Certainly he finds no dearth of material, though he is disappointed not to find integrative texts in the school of the “new labor history” for the northern Plains, the social history that features labor in the context of people’s everyday lives. Pratt organizes his study by industry, by geographical area, by particular labor movements, and of course, as befits a historian, by time period. His research turns up relatively little about railroad workers and a great deal about the radicalism of miners. Historians give radical farm movements prominence, though without providing the synthesis other historians have given to movements in other places. Both the Knights of Labor and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or Wobblies) had their days on the Great Plains, but Pratt notes that much more could be said about them. What exactly went on in local organizations of the Knights of Labor? And what happened to former Wobblies after the movement faded?

Pratt finds much written on packing house workers and Teamsters, two of the groups organized into the most powerful unions—and most controversial for their strike actions.

Employers' reactions to unions and their demands is another area that requires study. Perhaps the most surprising finding in Pratt's article has to do with the present. Nebraska, surely as staid as Peoria (as in "Will it play in Peoria?"), turns out to lead the northern Plains in the effective unionization of state workers. (But Peoria is also a union town—think of Caterpillar and strikes.) Left and right—or perhaps what we mean by left and right—do swap around in unexpected ways.

While Pratt shoots through a wide-angle lens, Gerald Zahavi looks through a microscope at 1918 to 1934 Sheridan County, Montana, a region of grain elevators and checkerboard fields and Catholic and Lutheran churches and small towns—and a well organized local Communist Party that successfully contested county elections. Zahavi gives the history of the county and its institutions, but the heart of his story is the lives of the individual people, from young teachers arriving from normal school to hoboes looking for refuge in the home of a socialist sheriff. Townspeople instructed the teachers to stay away from the "Reds" and firmly cemented them to the shopkeepers and other folk from Mainstreet. Soon the teachers didn't need any minding. "Who's going to dance with somebody who calls you a Mainstreeter?" sniffed Bernadine Logan, giving Zahavi the title for his article. As for Walter Currie, the itinerant Wobblie arrested for "vagrancy and drunkenness" tried to ingratiate himself with the officers by declaring his desire to register to vote so he could support the left-wing sheriff at the upcoming election. Sheriff Salisbury, already under fire from conservatives, could have done without such enthusiastic public support from someone "Mainstreeters" could only regard as "riffraff."

If newcomers to the county illustrate the divide between the socialists and the bourgeois townsfolk, it is the long-time Reds who

are the focus of Zahavi's text. He traces their socialist roots, their conversion to Communism, and finally their inability to keep the support of the electorate, their factionalizing, and their decline. Inevitably political life and personal life intertwined. Being a radical, being an outsider (even in office), being "the kind of man your mother warned you about" broke down the social conventions. The lines were drawn and the hostilities rendered implacable after the Communists had been voted out of office. Former Sheriff Salisbury's hired man was tried for having allegedly threatened a teacher who was keeping young Janis Salisbury after school. Mainstreeters and teachers arrayed themselves against the radicals. Salisbury's private life became markedly unconventional, as he shared his time with his wife and their daughters and with his comrade Marie Hansen and their children. When Salisbury's daughter Janis died, her funeral was secular and seemed odd to fellow radicals and scandalous to the Mainstreeters. The very unconventionality that allowed him to become a Communist sheriff in Montana eventually led Salisbury down paths that were more upsetting to his constituents than any Wobblie's endorsement, while his Trotskyist ideas finally led to a split with the Party as well.

From the Farmer-Labor Temple in Plentywood, Montana, bedecked with red flags and emblazoned with hammers and sickles, to union members on the killing floors of Omaha packing houses during the Depression, to the organized state and municipal workers of the 1990s, Radicals and the labor movement have been at home on the Plains. These two articles help us understand what that has meant for all of us.

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