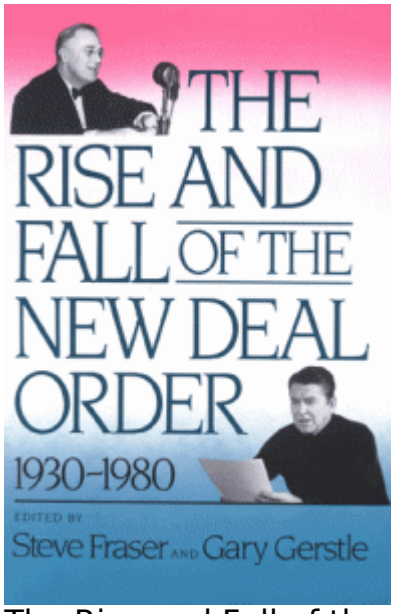


Let’s Draw Horns on Roosevelt’s Head by Chad Pearson

Posted on April 27, 2014 by Chad Pearson

A number of the historians in the audience at the 2014 Organization of American Historian’s session on the state of political history in the post-1945 period were pleased to learn that a new edition of the Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order will soon be released. The widely-read volume is edited by Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, two scholars who had begun their academic careers as labor historians. Gerstle, the panel’s first speaker, no longer identifies as a labor historian. More than a decade ago, he had succumbed to what I call “Wilentzian syndrome,” an all-too-common condition named after former labor historian Sean Wilentz who, like a number of others in mid-career, made a scholarly and political shift from the left to the center/left. Distancing oneself from labor history is one signal of this condition; attacking radical scholars like the late Howard Zinn is another common feature. In any event, Rise and Fall, published during papa Bush’s presidency, tells us much about the state and society between Roosevelt and Reagan, and has served as a foundational text for countless numbers of historians interested in the rise of the right and American political history generally.

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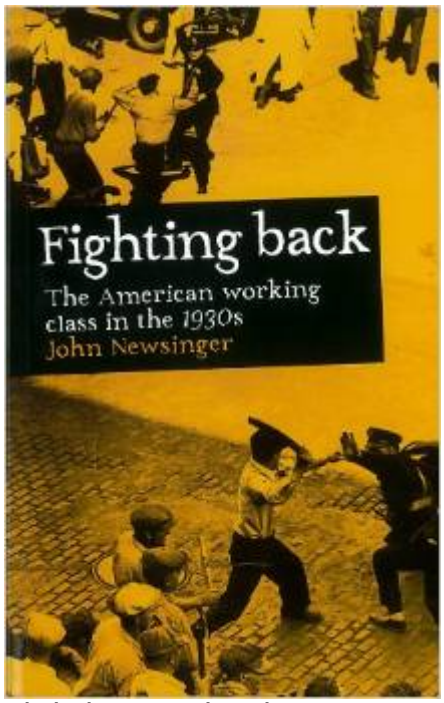
The Rise and Fall of the New Deal ORder will soon be re-released.

Today's scholarly atmosphere, partially inspired by this influential collection, helps spread the message that we should remember Roosevelt, first and foremost, as a friend of the working class, not primarily as the individual responsible for saving capitalism in the face of widespread labor and leftist unrest. We are often told that the principle working class opponent and leading defender of capitalism in the twentieth century was Reagan. Fair enough, and no sensible observer can deny the very real differences between the two men. Rise and Fall's colorful cover features a picture of Roosevelt on the top left and Reagan on the bottom right. Bethany Moreton, a panel member who delivered a terrific presentation about the emergence of historiographical trends that link capitalism to politics, told the audience that she had once taken a magic marker to her copy of the book and drew horns on Reagan's head. Several members of the audience, sharing an entirely understandable hatred of the Republican president, chuckled in response.

But doesn't Roosevelt deserve horns on his head as well? After all, he collaborated with racist politicians, forced Japanese Americans into camps during World War II, expressed indifference to the police's murder of Chicago steel strikers in 1937, and collaborated with union leaders by insisting that labor give up the strike weapon during the war. And Democratic Party leaders after Roosevelt were often even more adversarial and thuggish. Truman played a critical role in challenging labor activists and the left, the Kennedy brothers went after organized labor in the name of

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fighting communism and corruption, and Carter was certainly no friend of the thousands of coal strikers in 1978. To be fair, contributors to the Fraser/Gerstle collection certainly note some of the limits of the New Deal state and liberalism generally. But we must look elsewhere to grasp the true nature of state repression, the ways in which the ruling class has established control over both political parties and the very serious divisions between establishment liberals and leftist activists. The book's index, for example, contains no entries on the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), the Smith Act, The Federal Bureau of Investigation—including Roosevelt's 1936 anti-leftist surveillance authorization –or COINTELPRO.

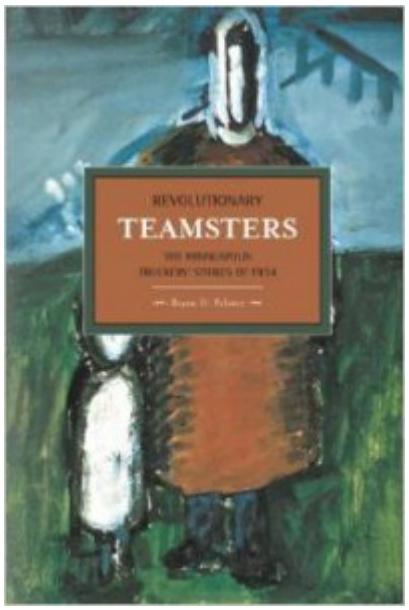


Fighting Back: The American Working Class in the 1930s by John Newsinger

Two recently published books about working class conflicts in the 1930s demonstrate why we should vigorously critique Roosevelt and the New Deal from the left: John Newsinger's Fighting Back: The American Working Class in the 1930s (London: Bookmarks, 2012) and Bryan D. Palmer's Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934 (Chicago: Haymarket, 2014). Both authors, neither of whom show any signs of Wilentzian syndrome, do an outstanding job of highlighting the forces on both sides of the class struggle and help us better

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understand the anti-union actions of the Roosevelt administration, demonstrating that, when push came to shove, it was no friend of working class activists. Newsinger is particularly candid, offering a refreshing observation all too rare in today's academic climate, one that often seems obsessed with identifying the multiple evils of conservatives in the post-New Deal decades: Roosevelt's "speeches were intended to mobilize working class support, while his actions were, as always, intended to protect the capitalist system and the interests of the ruling class of which he was a member." Palmer, one of the world's most important and influential historians of labor and the left, describes the dramatic battles of 1934, which were led by solidarity-building working class activists, radicals who looked to one another, rather than to politicians, to win struggles against their exploitative bosses and a repressive state.



Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934 by Bryan D. Palmer

Palmer's book is especially impressive in demonstrating the victorious 1934 Trotskyist-led Teamster strike in Minneapolis, one of the high points of the labor movement. The opponents of the city's Teamster activists, led by the city's businessmen-led Citizens' Alliance, were undoubtedly fierce. The Citizens' Alliance, like comparable open-shop organizations in cities throughout the US and Canada, had typically gotten their way throughout the early part of the twentieth century,

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but they faced a serious defeat in 1934. They nevertheless remained powerful in their community, and continued to harass union activists and exploit workers. Some even worked with Minneapolis's Silver Shirts, a fascist organization.

But the Citizens' Alliance and "the right" were certainly not the only opponents of working class activists in the Spring and Summer months of 1934, and Palmer notes the ways in which a motley crew of anti-leftist trade union leaders like the sleazy, Roosevelt-allied Teamsters International President Dan Tobin and liberal politicians, including twofaced Farmer-Laborite governor Floyd B. Olson, stood on the wrong side of the class struggle. He explains, "Olson oscillated between speeches of support for the truckers and back-room manoeuvres with their employer-adversaries, but he never wavered from an ultimate willingness to call out that National Guard to break Local 574's strikes." And of course, the first victims of the 1940 anti-leftist Smith Act, signed by Roosevelt, were 29 Trotskyist activists involved in the strikes of 1934. No "moral capitalism" here.

I will remember this history when I purchase the new edition of The Rise and Fall of The New Deal Order. Inspired by tough-minded, class conscious writers likes Newsinger and Palmer, I will certainly draw horns on the heads of both Reagan and Roosevelt!

Author



Chad Pearson

Chad Pearson is professor at University of North Texas*. His work includes Capital's Terrorists: Klansmen, Lawmen, and Employers in the Long Nineteenth Century* (University of North Carolina Press, 2022) and *Reform or Repression: Organizing America's Anti-Union Movement* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

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