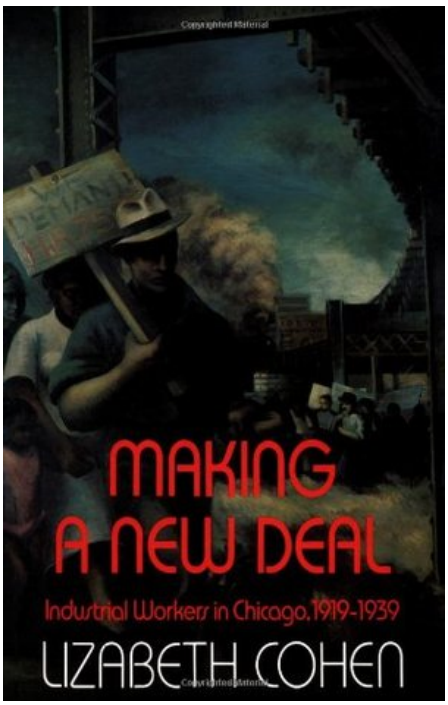

Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939

Lizabeth Cohen

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The lives of Chicago workers are traced in the mid thirties to reveal how their experiences as citizens, members of ethnic or racial groups, wage earners and consumers, converged to transform them into New Deal Democrats and CIO unionists.

Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939 Details

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From Reader Review Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939 for online ebook

Christian Holub says

With the world in crisis and our country headed toward some kind of reconfiguration in the near future, I've been really interested lately in reading about the New Deal, to see what can be learned from the last time American society was reconfigured for the better. Having already read a biography of FDR, I loved getting the chance here to see the New Deal from the perspective of industrial workers on the ground - and in Chicago, no less! This book taught me so much, not just about the labor struggles of the 20s and 30s, but also about the history of my home city and the people who have lived, worked, and struggled there. Cohen gives a detailed look at every segment of the workforce (Eastern/Southern European immigrants, African-Americans, Mexicans) how they lived, why they worked, what they listened to on the radio, and how they came to build the New Deal and the CIO. If you're on the same intellectual track as me these days, I highly recommend this one.

Kaufmak says

It is hard to believe that this book is over twenty years old. I still refer to it when discussing the Great Depression and the formation of the New Deal coalition of the 1930s. I think the greatest strength of the book is the detailed description Cohen gives us of the social safety net that existed in the United States prior to the Depression. Local communities, tight knit ethnic communities, religious organizations and other local entities that would help those that were in need. By and large this was the widow who couldn't work, the elderly and the occasional working man who hit a rough patch. Sometimes in a capitalist economy, the local structures might be a little more stressed, but things would turn around.

Then the Great Depression hit. Cohen does a marvelous job of explaining how earth-shattering an event this was. Institutions that once were the safety net of a community found themselves overwhelmed, ill-equipped and sometimes destroyed like so many other parts of the economy. All levels of government were in similar straits. The almost slavish devotion to a balanced budget was practically crippling to city, state and national administrations. It wasn't, as some seem to posit, that those in power were cold, a very unfair characterization of Herbert Hoover, but the experience was so out of their purview that they were at a loss.

Cohen then describes how the various ethnic groups in Chicago coalesced around the ideas of the New Deal and became more of a working-class, united within unions, specifically the CIO, and under the umbrella of the Democrats and the New Deal. This is her central point: how the New Deal was more than a collection of programs emanating from Washington. It was much more of a grass-roots, organized effort. All things considered, I still feel like the working class in the United States is more of a fantasy than a reality. In the 1930s it was as close as it was probably every going to get, and to be a worker meant voting one way, which at the time dovetailed nicely with ones class. However, a couple of major sticking points regarding Cohen and her praise of this class formation. First, as the Depression ends, World War II ends, the workers are not interested in political power, as in a more European model, but are more than happy trade that in for middle-class comforts. Second and much more importantly, Cohen does not discuss race...like at all. The Great Migration had transformed Chicago, yet I'm not sure it even registers in *Making a New Deal*. More to the point, the lionization of the workers always annoys me because the second an African-American attempted to make inroads into the benefits of this new class culture, they were immediately cut down, rarely allowed

into the union shops, definitely no equity in housing, or pay, or political representation. The sad truth about the United States, is that race trumps class. It is hard to see a working class golden age, when those same workers were busy beating African-Americans who dared to cross the street or apply for a job in a "white" factory.

Jessica Injejikian says

My huge issue with this book is that this question was not answered: Would the working class have had a voice at all in the CIO if Communists did not participate as CIO leaders?

Because of this, I am not convinced that the working class truly had a powerful voice due to their political activism in the CIO during the 1930s. While the working class pushed for its creation, the CIO was ultimately a national, top-down, organization. The author perpetually argues that the working class ideology of moral capitalism, seeded in the 1920s and Great Depression, largely affected the CIO during the 1930s. Yet the author also points out that Communists played a big role as CIO leaders during this time, and admits that Communists leaders were sensitive to the needs/wants of the working class. OF COURSE COMMUNISTS FOCUSED ON WORKING CLASS NEEDS; THAT'S WHAT THEY DO! The author seems to argue Communists listened to workers because workers were actively making themselves heard, which may somewhat be the case...but wouldn't Communist CIO leaders have essentially fought for changes that would benefit the working class, regardless of their interaction? Cohen admits, "Ordinary factory workers were using Communist organizers as much as they were used by them" (p.311), which pushes me even further from Cohen's argument, along with her "stopping of the historical clock" in 1940...in which we see that as Communists exit the CIO, the aims of the CIO turn against the workers' moral capitalism. A similar argument can be made for the workers' alliance with the Democratic Party, which I think Cohen is clearer about...but in my reading of this book she relentlessly emphasizes the worker's active role in the CIO.

I generally agree with Cohen's overarching argument that the working class was a distinct political unit that operated as it did during the 1930s because of unified, yet changing, individual orientations grounded in the 1920s and Depression, but my thinking above almost entirely ruined this book for me. Maybe someone in class tomorrow will bring up a point about the Communist CIO leaders that I missed...

Also, in A Fierce Discontent, the author stresses the idea that Victorian independence was relinquished by the Progressive middle class during the 1930s. This can been seen in the working class in this book, as they became increasingly dependent on the state to find a solution to their problems. That sounds bad, but it was a logically progression. Workers received some support from ethnic institutions previously, then welfare capitalists advocated providing benefits for workers to ensure worker loyalty during the 1920s. Yet capitalists rarely provided the very expectations they generated, then largely couldn't during the Depression. Workers then felt entitled to fair treatment and moral capitalism (since they voted and contributed to society), so they looked to the state.

James says

Cohen sought to answer the question of why the strikes of 1919 in Chicago (and beyond) were defeated by division by ethnicity and skill, while by 1935, the same neighborhoods and working class communities readily embraced unions and demanded programs from the government, which resulted in the New Deal.

Cohen seeks to reframe the New Deal not as solutions brought from labor leaders and FDR from above, but instead, demands from below by working class people who had been hit hard by the depression and set aside old ethnic rivalries. Cohen begins with the 1919 mass strikes, which were utterly crushed everywhere but in the Garment Industry, where strong Jewish labor traditions prevailed. Otherwise, ethnically Chicago neighborhoods tended to be insular and divided by industry, ethnicity, and skill level. Over the course of the 1920s, Cohen argued, ethnic workers became steadily homogenized and Americanized by mass consumption and entertainment, common corporate charity, and finally, the utter upheaval that the Great Depression brought upon all working class people. The Depression brought unemployment, hunger, evictions, and precarious employment that fueled a demand for better treatment, which meant that street protests and unionization swelled massively, which also put pressure on the government to provide programs which had disappeared when charity and corporate recreation collapsed. Therefore, the same homogenization of immigrants and their children also set the seeds for mass participation in the New Deal and union democracy in industry, which in places like Steel, had previously been seemingly impervious to unions.

Key Themes and Concepts:
-"Moral Capitalism" grew out of the corporate welfare provided by companies to workers in order to keep unionization off the table, as well as company unions that made workers realize they had a common interest. Eventually, as the Great Depression caused these companies to shrink or abandon these programs, workers now believed they were entitled to a piece of capitalism's pie, which, along with Catholic social justice teachings of the 1920s, caused workers to believe only through unions would they receive what they deserved. Unions also sought to build common culture. They demanded that the state provide programs which they believed they had earned as workers.
-CIO built a unionism that was family oriented, and cut across geography and homes.
-Companies sought to keep unions out through charity, recreation, and building identification with the company. This later would be used by unions, in the 1930s to build common identity amongst workers through embracing the same tactics companies had used in the 1920s.

Simon Purdue says

In Lizabeth Cohen's seminal exploration of collectivization and unionization in Chicago in the inter-war years, the story of identity and industrial life is dramatically retold. Cohen rejects the previously accepted narrative that the sudden success of unionization efforts in the 1930s after years of disinterest and distrust was solely the result of institutional and political changes, arguing instead that it was affected more by a slow shift in identity and politics on the social level. She argues that people drove the push for unionization in the 30s, not politics. Cohen argues that in Chicago there was a sample representative of the country as a whole, hence her focus on the city. In Chicago like the rest of the United States, she argues that identities were fluid and malleable, and that they often shifted, merged and diverged depending on political, social and economic climates. The identity of a Chicagoan could easily drift from ethnic to native, and their identity as a worker, an Italian, a woman, or any of the other myriad identities available to them could become their defining feature. Thus in the great depression era the collective identity of many Chicagoans as poor and rejected workers superseded their ethnic and gendered identities, allowing unionization to occur on such a wide scale for the first time. Cohen argues that in previous attempts, particularly in the immediate post-WWI era, ethnic identities were still too strong and divided many workers in the city into distinct groups, making the efforts to unionize futile. Anti-immigrant sentiment was easily mobilized in order to crush attempts at collectivization, as was seen after the infamous Haymarket affair. Only when these identities were shifted and changed, uniting people of all backgrounds under one economic identity, could unionization occur on the

scale seen in the mid 1930s. This was spurred on by the growth of organizations such as the CIO, which stood for all workers regardless of their ethnic background or occupation.

AskHistorians says

Prize-winning study of the "New Deal Coalition"

Joseph Stieb says

I guess I have more of a thing for labor history than I previously thought. I generally enjoyed this exploration of workers' lives and the rise of unions in the 1930's.

Cohen argues that industrial workers in Chicago lived mostly in ethnic enclaves that they were heavily dependent on as social and economic networks. They experienced mass cultural phenomenon such as radio and movies, but these did not necessarily homogenize them, at least in the short term. These communities were pretty insular, and things like insurance companies, banks, and grocery stores tended to be locally owned and operated. The workers usually weren't in unions and had little interaction with the state or politics.

The key event that destroyed this lifestyle was the Great Depression. Ethnic communities could not handle the high unemployment numbers, the collapse of local banking and insurance companies, the evictions, and the major demands for charity. Feeling let down, ethnic workers increasingly turned to the government, especially the Democratic Party, for help. The result under FDR was the New Deal, which was not simply imposed from above but demanded and facilitated by workers' actions from below. Workers also reacted to the Depression by unionizing in massive numbers, aided by the federal government.

This is a great example of top-down and bottom-up histories coming together in a coherent narrative. Cohen is a great writer who organizes her argument very logically. She also includes the numerous, varied experiences of different groups in the population while also building a coherent narrative that generally applied to all workers.

Mike Hankins says

This is a close study of Chicago workers from the 20s through the New Deal, arguing that the Neal Deal was in a large part forged by the workers themselves, through the creation of "welfare capitalism."

In the early 20s, Cohen establishes how laboring ethnic groups were divided. Systems existed for each group to locally and independently take care of themselves -- through family structures but also ethnic-speficic banks, stores, churches, etc. The developing mass culture of the era didn't break down ethnic barriers as much as you might think, and Cohen is quite convincing on that point (also, factory owners encouraged such division).

As time moved forward, factory owners sought to create more loyalty to the company than to ethnic identities, this led to the creation of "welfare capitalism," encouraging the mixing of people, and a system of

rewards and stratification that undermined local ethnic institutions and generated identification and loyalty to the company and the job itself. Cohen argues that this worked quite well, not necessarily in forging company loyalty, but in breaking down ethnic barriers and allowing workers to see themselves as united together. It gave workers expectations of rewards, a sense of entitlement, and made radicalism less attractive.

In the Depression, these systems of welfare capitalism couldn't keep up. After workers had become united together, they stopped turning to local ethnic institutions for help (especially since they couldn't keep up with the problems of the depression either) and turned to unifying together for help -- essentially turning to the government and to unions in order to improve their situation. Workers became far more politicized as democratic policies started to give them a wider view beyond their ethnic identification. The Depression thus opens up a window where Republicans lost their dominance and Democrats took hold.

This is a solid work with a lot of detail and nuance -- its required reading for labor historians for sure, and is a key work for 20th Century US history. Even though its a narrow study of Chicago, it shows important trends that help explain a lot of the shifts in identity, labor, and politics during the depression. And of course, Cohen is a wonderful writer, so its very readable and fascinating throughout, with plenty of illustrative anecdotes.

Jason S says

Parts of the book that looked at breakdown of ethnic ties during mass culture of the 1920s was fascinating. Overall a great book to understand unionization and welfare capitalism.

Jensen Davis says

Extremely informative but boring as heck!

Billy says

The rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, or CIO, can be attributed to the changing attitudes and actions of industrial workers. Previously, historians have given more credit to the rise of the state and new union organizations and their leaders. 1920s laborers in Chicago were ethnically diverse. Ethnic elites and paternalistic employers created a security net for workers. The Great Depression severed these loyalties. Workers now turned to the democratic party—a clear example of mass media's influence in stifling parochialism and making these issues, and loyalties, national. These new alliances came, in part, because the laboring class was becoming homogenized. By the mid-1930s, workers shared much in common, in part because of cultural trends, the decline of ethnic institutions. New CIO unions worked hard to heighten workers' common ground to create a "culture of unity."

Cohen's years of investigation are telling. In 1919, the government was likely to side with business, and not labor, in part because they feared the radicalism of labor unions. Cohen's examination also questions the homogenization of all citizens in urban areas. Most scholars find this as a time in which identity was becoming nation; Cohen finds that localized, ethnic neighborhoods remained the norm in the mid-1920s. It took the Great Depression to change that reality. Mass media, such as radio, did not necessarily break down

traditional, ethnic loyalties either—in fact, it could reinforce them. But radio, movies and other forms of mass consumption did not expose all people to new cultural experience. They were, in a sense, practicing the politics of consumption as early as the 1920s.

It was working class culture that caused the rise of industrial unionism and worker politics in Chicago in 1930s. Before then, ethnic and racial divisions prevented effective working-class action. Industries recognized the importance of ethnicity and used it to assuage workers unions. Welfare capitalism, which included wage incentives, recreations programs, and workers' councils, was industry's attempt to placate unionizing workers. By mixing ethnicity in, for example, workers' councils, industries believed they could divide, and not cohere, union members. This backfired. Their arguments that capitalism could be moral (a clear struggle against socialist movements) only led the way for 1930s liberalism and reform. During the 1920s, however, encroaching outsiders broke down ethnic identifications. The Catholic church is one example; it replaced ethnic parishes with English speaking parishes. Large corporations too attracted workers' allegiances. National networks soon drove out ethnic radio stations and theaters. In time, mass culture broke down ethnic barriers. They used "mass culture to create a second-generation ethnic, working-class culture that preserved the boundaries between themselves and others." (147) these workers, faced with the great depression, thus made a new deal.

Malcolm says

This is a fabulous history of working class Chicago during the period between WW1 & WW2. To Cohen's credit she gets beyond the easy ttap of the depression-as-dominant narrative to draw in work and family life, workers' leisure lives, the challenge of ethnicity to class solidarity and so much more. A powerful and insightful social history of workers' lives.

David Bates says

Lizabeth Cohen's 1990 work Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939 takes this process a step further. While Brinkley incorporated regular citizens into the story of the New Deal through the approbation they gave to the ideas of populist critics of Roosevelt, Cohen's approach is a long and deep study of the blue color workers who became the base of the New Deal order. Choosing Chicago as a case study because of its multi-ethnic and interracial workforce, industrial economy and the copious records generated by University of Chicago researchers in the 1920s and 1930s, Cohen asks how and why workers turned to unions and electoral politics in the mid-30s and what their priorities were. Cohen argues that "what matters most in explaining why workers acted politically in the ways they did during the mid-thirties is the change in workers' own orientation during the 1920s and 1930s. Working-class American underwent a gradual shift in attitudes and behavior over the intervening decade and a half as a result of a wide range of social and cultural experiences." Cohen's account begins with the post-war strike wave of 1919, in which more than one in five Americans workers participated. The almost universally the strikes were broken as lack of resources, ethnic fragmentation and divisions between high and low skill workers took a toll. In the reactionary wave of nativism and anti-unionism that followed workers in Chicago retreated from unionism, invested in ethnic self-help societies and shunned mainstream political participation. Nevertheless, important changes were occurring which laid the groundwork for developments in the 1930s.

The changes Cohen shows are two-fold. First, the immigrant workers found common ground as they became more assimilated into the emerging mass culture of the 1920s. “Although they did not always recognize it, workers increasingly were shopping at the same chain stores, buying the same brand goods, going to the same chain theaters, and listening to the same radio programs on chain networks. . . Not only did they participate in more experiences that transcended Chicago neighborhoods, but also they were beginning it share a cultural life with workers elsewhere in the country.” Second, Cohen argues that the welfare capitalist policies adopted by industry leaders to buy off workers and avoid more unionization and strikes were reconciling workers to capitalism. Through the benefits, good pay and secure employment, managers were creating an idea among workers of what Cohen calls “moral capitalism,” in which labor and capital both profited. If the concessions to workers thus given were always limited and insufficient, the idea which was being created of an equitable bargain, rather than inherently unjust system, had legs. When organizing began in earnest following the Wagner Ac it was supported by a more culturally unified workforce and the demands of workers for a better cut of profits and increased consumption opportunities rather than deep structural reform, ideas and desires also expressed through ethnic workers increasing participation in mainstream politics through the Democratic Party. The ideas and demands became powerful influences during Roosevelt’s second and third terms.

Fel says

Prior to the 1930s, industrial workers in Chicago were isolated in small, tightly woven ethnic communities, racial and cultural tension between these communities made any working class movements impossible. In Making a New Deal, Lizabeth Cohen explores how it was possible for this severely fragmented working class of Chicago to join together in a united movement in the 1930s. She argues that although these Chicagoans held strong ties to very different ethnic groups, the Great Depression gave them a common ground so they could relate to each other like never before.

Cohen brilliantly lays out this gradual transformation of ethnic workers in Chicago to effectively show how and why they changed. There is controversy over whether Cohen depicts these changes as too neat and tidy, but she does address the fact that it was a complicated evolution. She does not seem to argue that this was the only answer to the problems faced by the working class in Chicago, but that these developments helped them unite and to them it probably seemed like the logical answer. While it was simplified a bit, she does address the resistance and clearly shows that these developments were not instantaneous. It took time for workers to trust the federal government enough to rely so heavily upon it, and for the workers to develop a common bond that allowed them to join together regardless of ethnicity. She begins by laying out the background information leading up to this change and then backs up each point with evidence and quotes found from letters and manuscripts belonging to the workers creating an effective look at the Great Depression from the bottom up.

Tim says

A book I have dipped heavily into in the past, but it was good to wade full in and see the full scope of Cohen's argument. In the 20s working class Chicagoans were tied to neighborhood and ethnic organization

(whether for banking/insurance, charity, religion or shopping). The large corporate employers (and she is looking at five particular neighborhoods on the South and West Side) managed to limit discontent due to these ethnic differences, as well as a small bit of corporate welfare (modest attempts at insurance, vacations, and profit sharing) and a fairly vibrant economy in the 20s. This economic time, especially in the aftermath of the post WWI steelworker strikes, was not a conducive environment for labor organizing.

Cohen recounts how the depression broke down both corporate welfare and, more importantly the ethnic connections, as ethnic banks collapsed, charities were overcome with the needy, and neighborhood stores were bankrupted when they extended too much credit. This allowed for a certain centralization, whether from federal government relief, the Democratic Party, chain grocery stores, movies, and radio stations, the Catholic Church, or labor unions organizing across ethnic, and even racial, lines. A history of workers, broad in scope, and including significant detail on African-Americans whose plight was similar to, but even more constrained by outside factors (read segregated housing and employment practices) that increased their reliance on the federal government's assistance, their only source of potential relief until some small space came with CIO organizing.
