

*A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America.* By Shelton Stromquist. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987. Pp. xix, 353. Illustrations, tables, figures, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.)

In *A Generation of Boomers* Shelton Stromquist undertakes the daunting task of explaining the recurrent labor conflict on the nation's railroads from the 1870s through the 1890s. A central concept in this wide-ranging book is that of a labor "frontier." When railroads entered a new region, labor scarcity enabled railroad workers—many of them "boomers," itinerants quick to move on at the slightest provocation—to demand good wages and a strong voice in determining work rules. Frontier conditions prevailed across much of the nation in the late 1870s but disappeared as the rail network expanded. Thus, workers gradually lost their "frontier" advantages, tempting railroad corporations to cut wages and seek control of the work process. The ongoing battle over such changes fueled the strikes of the late nineteenth century. When the railroad brotherhoods proved incapable of staving off management incursions, workers experimented with other forms of organization. The ultimate expression of nineteenth century railroad worker consciousness was Eugene V. Debs's American Railway Union. The ARU had the potential to play a pivotal role in the development of the American working class but was caught up in the bitter Pullman Boycott of 1894 before it was strong enough to withstand the combination of private economic power and government repression thrown against it.

During the final decades of the nineteenth century railroad managers began to develop systematic labor relations policies, primarily in response to labor unrest. Again, the Pullman Boycott was crucial. This challenge showed managers the necessity of controlling their employees; their inability to break the boycott without massive federal intervention argued for an ongoing government presence in railroad labor relations; and the threat posed by the ARU convinced them that the safer brotherhoods should be encouraged. Soon a new framework for railroad labor relations was constructed. Under this new order railroads adopted personnel policies designed to monitor and discipline workers. Certain managerial abuses were legally proscribed, but the permanent threat of injunctions left little doubt about which side the federal government would take in serious labor disputes. Skilled workers, represented by the brotherhoods, won good wages and working conditions but at the cost of their solidarity with their less-skilled brethren. Railroaders faced a choice. They could accept the new regime, thereby abandoning the values and perquisites that had melded them into an articulate, class-conscious group. Or they could, like Debs, conclude that labor questions and political power were so entwined that a workers' movement that did not enter the political sphere

was futile. Debs soon led the remnants of the ARU into the Social Democracy of America.

Stromquist explores many other questions, including the nature of community support for railroad strikers and the role of the Knights of Labor in railroad worker organization. His use of the concept of a "labor force life cycle" is particularly intriguing. The scope of this impressive book sometimes makes for difficult going; the complex material treated here is not easily organized, necessitating much repetition and shifting between topics. The introductory chapter fails to prepare the reader for what is to come, although the chapter summaries are very helpful. Stromquist sometimes works with a narrow research base; a few cities provide most of the data for some interpretations. While this obviously was necessary for a manageable project, much "fine-tuning" probably remains to be done through studies of other railroad towns. The author gathered his strike data from reports published by the office of the United States commissioner of labor for the years 1881–1894. These reports are a rich and largely untapped resource but must be used with caution: if the experience of this reviewer in studying one midwestern city is any indication, they can greatly underreport strikes.

These are minor concerns. Stromquist provides a fascinating look at railroad labor during a crucial period in the nation's history, presenting insights of such broad significance that this book should be of interest to all historians of the American working class.

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*Fordson, Farmall, and Poppin' Johnny: A History of the Farm Tractor and Its Impact on America.* By Robert C. Williams. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987. Pp. ix, 232. Notes, illustrations, figures, table, bibliography, index. \$24.95.)

Robert C. Williams's unique background—he is a Texas farmer with a Ph.D. in history—shapes his splendid book, which is both a careful history of the farm tractor and a polemical defense of small-scale, efficient farms. Williams provides a business history of the tractor industry, a description of the course of technological change, and an analysis of the effects of the tractor on farmers and farm life—all in a sprightly style that makes the book both accessible to the general reader and valuable for the scholar. The book's 37-page bibliography listing important scholarly books and articles along with federal and state government publications and articles from trade journals, newspapers, and farm publications testifies to Williams's indefatigable and meticulous scholarship and provides an invaluable aid for future research.