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Middle Class Union: Organizing the 'Consuming Public' in Post-World War I America. By Mark W. Robbins (University of Michigan Press, 2017. viii plus 219 pp. \$70.00).

In the immediate aftermath of World War I many Americans considered themselves part of a virtuous yet beleaguered and underappreciated middle class, a “forgotten folk” to use a phrase popularized by John Corbin in his influential book, *Return of the Middle Class* (1922). Inflation hit white collar workers particularly hard in this period because prices for basic necessities such as food, clothing and housing skyrocketed—on average the cost of dry goods rose by 223 percent between 1915 and 1919— while white collar wages stagnated. (2) In contrast, working class wages rose significantly, increasing by more than 50 percent between 1913 and 1919. In *Middle Class Union*, Mark W. Robbins shows how these challenging post-war economic conditions combined with the hyper-patriotism and potent cultural animosities of the red scare to fuel resentment and in so doing bring about the emergence of a new—and in many ways less than flattering—form of self-consciously middle-class consumer politics. Robbins focuses on middle-class efforts to combat high prices for three basic necessities: food, clothing and housing. The five chapters of *Middle Class Union* show, in turn, how middle class Americans served as a volunteer army for the United States Food Administration (USFA), planted home gardens and promoted municipal markets to bypass middlemen, contributed to Department of Justice efforts to combat profiteering in the sale of clothing, donned overalls to protest the high cost of maintaining a separate, and distinctively middle class, lifestyle, and (mimicking an established working class tactic) participated in rent strikes in the cause of landlord-tenant reform. Switching effectively throughout between local and national scales of analysis, Robbins shows that in all these cases middle class Americans presented themselves, quite implausibly, as politically neutral representatives of “the people” caught, as the *Chicago Daily Tribune* put it, “in a No Man’s Land between organized labor and capital” (p. 130). *Middle Class Union* is persuasive in demonstrating that an important strand of twentieth century consumer politics stemmed, at least in large

part, from middle class Americans' self-righteous conviction that they were victims both of unproductive unionized workers and of profiteering, price-gouging businessmen.

Following in the footsteps of historians such as David A. Horowitz and Robert D. Johnston, Robbins notes the ideological ambivalence of the early twentieth-century middle class: white collar workers favored local, state and national government action, drawing on the idea of state-led volunteerism championed by progressives; but at the same time they indulged in forms of protest that excluded women and non-white participants, mocked blue-collar workers, and promoted hostility to organized labor. Indeed the argument Robbins makes for the antilabor thrust of middle class consumer politics is so powerful and well-supported that he rather undermines his own case. *Middle Class Union* shows that USFA volunteers, joined by politicians and some sections of the press, attacked striking workers as unpatriotic, insufficiently thrifty, and greedy and that many white collar workers blamed blue collar Americans for high prices. "When workers win a shorter day," one self-styled "member of the middle class" rhymed, "The cost is passed along to me / And so it goes down the line / From shoes and clothes to light and heat / No old-time luxuries for mine— / I'm thankful now if I eat.... / When someone wins I always lose" (34). This book's final chapter on the Chicago Tenants Protective Association shows how very effectively the city's builders exploited the antiunion politics of middle class campaigners to serve their own interests, providing "a backdrop for the business conservatism" of the 1920s. Overall, therefore, the picture that emerges from this study of the aftermath of World War I is one that positions organized middle class consumers much more as harbingers of modern conservatism than of liberalism.

Middle Class Union is a compact monograph and historians of the early twentieth century United States will want to develop and expand upon its main themes. It pays surprisingly little attention, for instance, to the transnational dimensions of the topic, and its claim that

organized middle class consumers possessed a coherent vision of “economic justice” (19) requires further investigation as it is not fully substantiated. But in many respects this study is a model of its kind. Most notably, perhaps, it is exemplary in its refusal to force the story of twentieth century consumer politics into the rigid straightjacket of a metanarrative based on the idea of an inevitable, uncomplicated, and uncontested shift from a producer to a consumer society, and likewise from producer to consumer values. Robbins shows throughout that modern consumer organizing could be both politically conservative and substantially informed by such producer values as thrift, diligence, and manly independence. His fine book signals that the historiography of the politics of consumption has matured sufficiently that historians no longer feel compelled to emphasise the progressive character of consumer politics and activism or to overlook the ways in which the politics of production and consumption overlapped, entwined, and interacted. For these reasons *Middle Class Union* is an especially welcome addition to the Class: Culture series of the University of Michigan Press.

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