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Review of *Farmers vs. Wage Earners: Organized Labor in Kansas, 1860-1960* By R. Alton Lee

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Farmers vs. Wage Earners: Organized Labor in Kansas, 1860-1960. By R. Alton Lee. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. xiv + 340 pp. Map, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00.

In *Farmers vs. Wage Earners*, R. Alton Lee seeks to uncover the hidden history of organized labor in his native state of Kansas. Historians of the sunflower state have long valorized the agricultural roots of Kansas while largely overlooking the contributions of working men and women to the region's history. In this thorough and well-researched study, Lee attempts to redress this gap in historical knowledge and trace the development of the political, cultural, and economic boundaries that came to divide farmers from wage earners. The volume admirably documents the development of this antagonistic relationship while also providing a detailed outline of labor history in Kansas.

Farmers vs. Wage Earners is organized chronologically, beginning with the 1877 railroad workers strike and proceeding through the growth of the Knights of Labor, the Progressive Era, the New Deal, World War II, and the "right to work" movement. In what is a large undertaking, Lee successfully explores workers' struggles in the railroad industry, mining,

itinerant farm labor, aeronautics, defense, oil, and meatpacking. He skillfully uses a variety of sources to document everything from political negotiation at the highest levels of government to the personal experiences of women working in airplane factories during World War II. Pieced together, these sources provide both a wide-ranging and intimate look at the story of organized labor in Kansas and probe the question of why farmers and laborers came to see their interests as diametrically opposed, despite the fact that in many instances their goals, objectives, and material interests were nearly identical.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries relations between farmers and wage earners in Kansas were fairly amicable. Lee argues that in both small rural communities and the emerging cities, residents tended to support one another in opposition to the outside influences of big business from the East. While solidarity among local people clearly benefited organized labor in Kansas, the failure of workers to apply this principle to nationwide struggles was to be a fatal flaw in their ability to articulate with the broader labor movement in the country.

The strongest chapters in the book chronicle the development of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the New Deal, World War II, and finally the "right to work" movement. These hit at the heart of the cleavages that came to divide farmers and wage earners. Before World War I, some of the greatest successes of the IWW came in their efforts to organize itinerant farm workers who migrated through the Midwest each year. These largely unattached male laborers were some of the nation's most vulnerable workers, and the anarcho-syndicalist message of the IWW appealed to them. Farmers resented the demands of IWW workers and, like much of the nation, came to see them as undesirable vagrants and un-American radicals. Conversely, farmers constructed themselves as stable, productive, and quintessentially American. The cleavages between farmers and wage earners were to grow during World War II when young farm people

began to migrate to the cities in search of wartime employment. These young rural men and women were compelled to pay union dues in order to secure and maintain high-paying jobs on government contracts. With little understanding of the principles and practices of unionism, these farm people developed a great deal of resentment toward the powerful unions, a resentment that fueled the so-called "right to work" movement that developed after the war. The "right to work" movement and other regressive legislation were to roll back the successes labor had achieved in the previous decades.

In his conclusion Lee ponders the question of how Kansas was transformed by and through the struggles described in his book. In the late nineteenth century Kansas was at the forefront of labor reform and known as one of the most progressive places in the country. By the end of the twentieth century regressive legislation placed greater regulation and limitations on unions while giving big business tax breaks and relaxed regulation. From World War I onward, farmers and cattlemen across the state have generally supported limitation on strikes, boycotts, picketing, and other union weapons. Ultimately Lee concludes that the union movement in Kansas only experienced limited and periodic success because it was unable to forge a coalition with agrarian people who suffered from the same problems but held different social values and philosophies.

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