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Workers: Labor, the Left, and Wilsonian  
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- 1 Myriad works detail the impact of Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy on both the United States and the wider world, though none so far has considered its relationship with the US Left. *Making the World Safe for Workers* is Elizabeth McKillen's ambitious attempt to fill this gap in the Wilsonian discourse, in which she argues that despite Wilson believing cooperation between US and international labour movements to be "critical" to the success of his vision, excepting the core of the American Federation of Labour (AFL), few labour activists world over wholly accepted his internationalist agenda (1). One need only recall recent vocal opposition to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) to appreciate the continuing interconnectedness of the working class and foreign policy, yet working class movements rarely figure into works of diplomatic history. This makes McKillen's book a refreshing study not only for its content, but also for what it seeks to achieve in presenting an answer to the pertinent yet oft ignored question of how foreign policy and labour should coincide.

2

No stranger to the history of the American Left, McKillen calls upon a decade of research to compile this skilful synthesis. The introduction succinctly sets out McKillen's main arguments, which then proceeds to outline the four thematic sections that make up the book's form. The first section analyses the Left's response to Wilson's first major foreign policy dealing, the Mexican Revolution; here, McKillen sets the tone for the rest of the book by painting a picture of a President indifferent to leftist disapproval of his actions. Wilson's preference for executive supremacy in foreign affairs is brought to light, alienating him from the Socialist Party and organized American labour from the outset, which logically favoured more democratic diplomacy. The labour lens with which

McKillen analyses Wilson's actions in Mexico allows her to reveal the hypocrisies of his foreign policy in a way that traditional diplomatic histories fail to do. For example, Wilson claimed that his interventions in Mexico were initiated to help the Mexican people, yet in reality they merely protected American economic interests there. An augury of the relationship that followed, from the American Left it was only the AFL that "took Wilson's rhetoric at face value" and accepted such empty statements (49).

3

The second section moves on to the tense period of US neutrality and discusses the Socialist Party's reaction to US neutrality and preparedness. This history is already well established—Socialist Party historians such as David Shannon have discussed the significance of the Party's opposition to US involvement for some time—and McKillen introduces little in the way of new interpretation on the matter; however, what does emerge through these chapters is the rise of the AFL President, Samuel Gompers. Gompers is of primary importance in the book, as he is the chief link between President Wilson and the labour movement. It is shown here how his complementary views on the Mexican Revolution and regarding the anti-war faction of the Socialist Party initiated his ascendancy to Wilson's *de facto* labour representative.

4

With the Socialist Party overwhelmingly opposed to preparedness, Wilson was able to use Gompers to garner working class support; numerous high-level appointments easily ensured his compliance. As the US moved towards belligerency, however, acquiescence within the ranks of the AFL and organized labour in general was far less certain. In section three, McKillen utilizes several organizations as case studies to explicate the unrest in American labour movements both before and after US entry to the war. Four disparate groups, The Seattle Central Labor Council (96), The Chicago Federation of Labor (100), The United Mine Workers of America (105) and the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (111) are shown to have strong anti-war views for varying reasons, thus undermining Gompers' pro-war representation. Wilson's brutal suppression of dissenting voices, largely from the Left, cements McKillen's exposé of Wilson's rhetoric versus the reality of his policy. Whilst it is clear that Gompers lost the "battle" for the sympathies of American workers—as demonstrated by the case studies—he nonetheless "won the collective ear of the Wilson administration," leaving the majority of the American working class without a voice (150).

5

The fourth section covers the aftermath of the war, arguably the most important period in terms of Wilsonian global influence. The ultimate failure of the Paris Peace Conference and its peripheral summits to live up to Wilson's lofty promises is explained through the lens of transatlantic relations between the AFL and its European counterpart organizations. Opposition to the labour provisions for the peace treaty are outlined, further expounding Wilson's apathy towards the Left. McKillen argues that Gompers had a polarizing effect on the peace conference, much as he did on organized American labour in general. Wilson is revealed to have utilized the AFL to promote his foreign policy yet ultimately fail to incorporate labour bodies into any "actual policymaking circles" (184).

6

The one effort that saw Wilson and the Left actually converge is detailed in the final chapter, where McKillen elucidates the domestic deliberations that occurred over

the ILO. During these strenuous debates opponents of the ILO eschewed the incremental progress it promised owing to its inability to fully promote industrial democracy.

7

*Making the World Safe for Workers* presents a compelling argument that maintains that Wilson's foreign policy in fact made the world safe for capitalism, not workers. Through interweaving diplomatic history that looks beyond Washington D.C. with US labour history, McKillen depicts the artificialities and contradictions of Wilson's vision and his relationship with the working class that are largely ignored by traditional Wilson scholars. Similarly, Samuel Gompers is exposed as an ultimately divisive force in the movement, having achieved little of worth to the Left despite years of high-level prominence. McKillen advances strong contentions that challenge dominant narratives, such as the notion that despite initial theoretical support, significant divergences over Wilson's blueprints for the League of Nations meant that Socialist and Left groups in fact spearheaded opposition to US entry and played a previously underappreciated role in ensuring the US remained outside of it.

- 8 As with any synthesis of this scope, there are unavoidably omissions. The impact of the Espionage and Sedition Acts on Socialist, labour and Left movements, for example, seems underemphasised, though such judgements are understandable given the scale of the study. Stylistically, McKillen's prose can be at times awkward and repetitive; individuals are often re-introduced in different chapters and facts are repeated, impeding the book's readability. However, the depth and quality of research that adeptly intertwines race, gender, and class considerations overshadows these stylistic weaknesses. Regardless of such comments, McKillen's text is a valuable addition to both the fields of US diplomatic and labour history, and redresses the balance of many previously under-analysed aspects of Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy.

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