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Farmers vs. Wage Earners: Organized Labor in Kansas, 1860–1960

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In the end (although, as I've noted, this collection really doesn't have an end), Brody leaves his readers virtually squashed by the dead weight of history. There seems to have been—and to be—no alternative. This is where the contributions of that other school of thought in labor history's debates of the 1960s and 1970s can provide us with some hope. Paying more attention to "who" the workers are (race, gender, ethnicity) and the values, experiences, and traditions they bring into the workplace and into unions, to their cultures and consciousness and its complex relationships to dominant structures, value systems, and cultural practices, can help us explore alternatives to the hand that history has dealt us. How might labor historians bring together the profound decline of union institutions, on the one hand, with the massive immigrant demonstrations of April and May 2006, demonstrations that proclaimed "I am a Worker, Not a Criminal," "No Human Is Illegal," and "I Demand My Rights"? How might the millions of immigrants who marched in Los Angeles, Chicago, St. Paul, New York City, and elsewhere hold answers to the crisis of the labor movement in their hands? That Brody's carefully crafted and compelling framework can offer only silence to such important questions should force readers, even as they learn valuable insights from *Labor Embattled*, to keep pushing for more.

Farmers vs. Wage Earners: Organized Labor in Kansas, 1860–1960, by R. Alton Lee. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. xiv, 340 pp. Illustrations, map, table, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00 cloth.

Reviewer Wilson J. Warren is associate professor of history at Western Michigan University. His most recent book is *Tied to the Great Packing Machine: The Midwest and Meatpacking* (University of Iowa Press, 2007). He is also the author of "The 'People's Century' in Iowa: Coalition-Building among Farm and Labor Organizations, 1945–1950" in the *Annals of Iowa* (1988).

Historians have written little about the relationships between farmers and wage earners in American history. With few exceptions, perhaps most notably Lawrence Goodwyn's pathbreaking work on the Populist movement, American working-class historians have usually contented themselves with generalizations about the hostility of farmers and farm organizations to organized labor and workers and vice versa. Yet, especially in the Midwest during much of the twentieth century, farmers *became* laborers; that is, over the course of the century farmers either took industrial jobs on a part-time basis to bolster their income or, more often, they left farming on a permanent basis and pursued industrial employment. Aside from the work of James N. Gregory and

Chad Berry, there is a paucity of work on the ways rural and urban residents have contributed to the Midwest's working-class history.

The title of R. Alton Lee's book on the history of organized labor in Kansas suggests a focus on this significant issue. Actually, as he notes in the preface, "this is a brief survey of the [organized labor] movement in an attempt to find social meaning in an industrial development that took place in a predominately agrarian state" (xi). The result is an overview that shows how "the development of labor in Kansas followed basically the pattern of the nation as a whole" (283). Although largely conventional in its treatment of the standard array of labor topics, including the Knights of Labor, Industrial Workers of the World, AFL, and CIO, Lee's survey of organized labor in Kansas includes some intriguing material that in fact suggests some of the complex dynamics between farmers and wage earners from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries.

For much of the period studied in the book, Lee describes how farmers and wage earners opposed each other, or, more accurately, how their organizations opposed one another. Crucially, the dominance of the state legislature by farmers or others with farm interests usually stacked the deck against organized labor. Yet, during the Populist period of the 1890s, as Lee explains, reform-minded legislators "left a good legacy of labor legislation despite workers failing to reciprocate with political support for agrarians" (65). Populism never united the rural and urban political elements in the state. Strangely, Lee fails to cite Jeffrey Ostler's work on this issue. Later, during the 1920s and even into the 1930s, when many farmers abandoned rural locations for urban centers, workers' organizing efforts were stymied. Ethnic and cultural conflict was a major reason why workers' efforts were opposed in Kansas. Lee explains this conflict in reference to union organizing and strikes among foreign-born coal miners in the tri-state area and Eastern Europeans and blacks in Kansas City's meatpacking industry. In contrast, unionism had less appeal among the native-born whites with farming backgrounds who toiled in the tri-state area's lead and zinc mines. Lee provides a wealth of details on the growth of Wichita's aircraft industry, as World War II propelled thousands of rural Kansans into manufacturing. Arguably the strongest material on the clash between farm and labor interests in Kansas history comes in the final chapter on the post-World War II era, when antiunionism was rampant throughout the country. Interestingly, though, Lee provides considerable insight into the strength of the Democratic Party, centered on Governor Fred Hall and the state CIO organization, both of which undoubtedly had captured the loyalties of quit or part-time farmers.

Other portions of Lee's book indicate how farmers and industrial workers occasionally formed alliances. This is particularly evident in the chapter on the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Despite Lee's disclaimer in the introduction that he does not focus significant attention on farm laborers, he explains the central contribution of farm laborers to the IWW's success in Kansas during World War I. Some farmers, recognizing the importance of hobo labor from the East in filling temporary harvest labor positions, even supported the IWW's efforts. Lee then devotes considerable attention to the attempts by Governor Fred Hall and the state CIO to stave off a right-to-work law in Kansas after World War II. Partly due to efforts to enlist support from farmers, a right-to-work law eventually passed in 1958 but did so later than in other midwestern states, such as Iowa.

Although useful and interesting in many respects, Lee's history of organized labor in Kansas would have benefited from a clearer discussion of the structure and development of manufacturing in the state. The author seems to assume that readers already understand this history. For instance, meatpacking was important not only in Kansas City during the period surveyed in the book; it was also a vital part of Wichita's and Topeka's economies. Unfortunately, nothing is said about those cities' packing industries. The patterns and developments noted in this book will need to be supplemented with future studies.

Native Soil: A History of the DeKalb County Farm Bureau, by Eric W. Mogren. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005. xi, 288 pp. Illustrations, map, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 cloth.

Reviewer Kimberly K. Porter is associate professor and chair of the Department of History at the University of North Dakota. She has written extensively about the early years of the Iowa Farm Bureau.

At first glance, a volume focusing on a single county within the American Farm Bureau Federation might not necessarily jump off the shelf. However, not to take the opportunity to read Eric Mogren's *Native Soil* is to make a significant error, particularly for agricultural historians, historians of the Midwest, and even generalist scholars of the American experience. With the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) standing as the largest general farm organization in the United States, Illinois being a perpetual candidate for the largest state organization within the federation, and the DeKalb County Farm Bureau (DCFB) the most powerful one within the state, the volume has a great deal to offer readers on the condition of American agriculture throughout the twentieth century.