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Review [untitled]

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contribution of women's wages to the household budget, many of the new consumer items available in the 1920s could not have been purchased.

Cross's discussion of leisure also focuses exclusively on the male worker; this, he argues, simply reflects the interwar debates. Yet feminist social historians such as Kathy Peiss and Victoria de Grazia have shown both the importance of commercialized pastimes such as the cinema and popular magazines in the lives of interwar working women, but also how much official anxiety and commentary these pleasures generated. Similarly, nowhere in his lengthy discussion of intellectuals and mass culture does Cross consider the gendered organization of debates about high and low culture, the "traditional" and the popular. Yet, as de Grazia and others have argued, "prevailing intellectual opinion identified mass culture with femaleness."

In the end, then, the book's claim to be about "the making of consumer culture" is limited by Cross's failure to fully take into account the gender processes at work in the material he analyses. At the same time, while often buried in inelegant and dull prose, the book does raise some stimulating questions about the central dilemmas of time and money. While they may quarrel with some of Cross's arguments, interpretations, and evidence, historians of labour, leisure, and mass consumption/culture should nevertheless find *Time and Money* worthwhile.

Cynthia Wright
York University

Hardy Green, *On Strike at Hormel: The Struggle for a Democratic Labor Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1990).

THIS YEAR MARKS the tenth anniversary of the beginning of the great Hormel meatpackers' strike, one of the central industrial disputes of the 1980s. In 1984,

the George A. Hormel Company — whose most famous produce was the World War II creation of canned spiced ham, or Spam — announced a 23 per cent wage and benefits cut for the workers in its seven plants in the American heartland. Of these workers, it was the 1,500 members of the P-9 local of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) in Austin, Minnesota (a town of 25,000), who challenged the contract. By the summer of 1986, they had lost their battle, but not before showing in action how concessions and the employers' offensive could be opposed. This is captured marvellously in Hardy Green's account of the battle at Hormel.

This "middle America" strike took place at the mid-point of the Reaganite 1980s. The state and the employers saw the 1980s as marking the triumph of the market and free enterprise. This capitalist victory was supposed to lead to wealth, prosperity, and all the good things "trickling down" to the workers below. But the triumph of the market at Hormel produced not a trickle but a stream that flowed up to the rich, not down to the poor. To cite just one example, after the defeat of the strike, wages plummeted from around \$10 an hour to \$6.50 for those 300 workers whose jobs were subcontracted to Quality Pork Processors. (293)

Much of the academic left saw the 1980s as marking the disappearance of the working class. But "during 1985-86, P-9 received thousands of letters of support. ... Many union officers and individuals said that they had walked on picket lines and knew all the associated anxieties well." (287) In the course of the strike, "over three thousand unions and other organizations from every state responded" to P-9 appeals for solidarity. "Supporters from across the country came to Austin to attend mass demonstrations, marches, and rallies. Thousands sent letters of support, food, and funds and joined in the anti-Hormel protest activities that took place in virtually every U.S. city." (4) Even deep in the heart of Texas,

“sponsors of a heavily publicized annual spoof event, the SPAM-O-RAMA barbecue, announced the event’s postponement, saying that they had instead ‘decided to honor the nationwide Boycott of Hormel products.’” (254) The spread of T-shirts, buttons, and posters invoking the viewer to “CRAM YOUR SPAM” became the slogan which demonstrated that the working class in the US was indeed far from dead.

Finally, the official union leadership, particularly in the US, saw the 1980s as marking the end of the era of class struggle and the “traditional” tactics of the workers’ movement, and the time for a transition to the realm of reason and compromise. But as Green clearly shows, it was only class struggle unionism which allowed the workers to fight at all. In January and February 1986, mass pickets again and again kept scabs out of the plant, fought the National Guard, and brought out several Hormel-owned plants in nearby towns in sympathy strikes. Green sees these class struggle highpoints as the key to the strike, and that had the strike leaders gone just a few steps further, “Hormel would have had to find a way out.” (286) There is no doubt in my mind that Green is absolutely right.

However, the strike was lost, and after reading Green’s account, three factors seem to have been all-important in that defeat. First, the concerted and often-times illegal violence organized by the employer and the agencies of the state kept workers on the defensive. Second, the incredible betrayal and pro-employer, pro-concessions stand of the national leadership of the UFCW undercut labour’s resistance. Third, the limits inherent in the “corporate campaign” in which Green was centrally involved (he was, at the time of the strike, employed by Ray Rogers’ union consulting firm, Corporate Campaign Inc.) circumscribed and contained the challenge to Hormel. Green is without question right to lay the principle blame for the defeat of the strike at the foot of boss and bureaucrat, the first two

of these three factors. He is not clear, however, on the third — the limits inherent in the corporate campaign strategy. Let us look at each of these three factors in turn.

Green shows how employers and the state acted in concert to attack the P-9 strike. The strikers at one point were picketing branches of First Bank as part of Rogers’ strategy of making any corporation closely linked to Hormel suffer economically. On 23 September 1985, US District Court Judge Edward Devitt “issued a temporary injunction prohibiting any further First Bank activities.” (79) In April 1986, the same judge issued an injunction “prohibiting threatening or harassing scabs by any means.” (241) On 2 June, Devitt upheld the right of the anti-Hormel strike UFCW bureaucracy to place the P-9 local under trusteeship. (253) And one month later, he ruled that P-9’s union hall was no longer theirs — that it was now the property of the UFCW leadership who had sabotaged the strike. (261)

The close link between state and employer did not end with the judiciary. On 13 January 1986, the company tried to reopen the struck plant. After mass pickets prevented them from doing so, Governor Rudy Perpich called in the National Guard. They, together with local police, used tear gas, mass arrests, and armoured personnel carriers to allow scabs to slowly filter into the Austin plant. Even the State Highway Patrol, “supposedly banned by law from any involvement in a labor dispute,” at one point prevented P-9 strikers from keeping scabs out of the plant. (137) This, then, was the real face of “free” enterprise triumphant — an intransigent employer, with access to the courts, the cops, and the army, unencumbered in its use of any and all means to crush the P-9 strikers.

But vicious as the attacks of the employer and the state were, they could not in themselves have defeated the strike if it were not for the role of the national leadership of the UFCW. Along with the entire union leadership in the US, the

UFCW bureaucrats strongly believed that resistance to attacks on wages and jobs in the early 1980s was impossible. The 1979-82 recession had a devastating impact on US employment. In that context, under the sheltering umbrella of Reaganism, employers everywhere threatened plant closures unless their workforces agreed to wage cuts and reductions in benefits — in short, the type of concessions over which the Hormel strike was fought. And the US union bureaucracy, perhaps more than any other national union leadership, believed that not to agree to concessions would mean an inevitable loss in jobs. UFCW national leaders were enthusiastic backers of this pro-concessions policy.

In 1981, this UFCW bureaucracy decided that all Hormel locals should agree to concessions (41) to “bring lower wage operators more in line with master agreement companies” and “minimize the wave of plant closings.” (46) The response of the company was to use the money saved to finance a new \$100-million plant opened in August 1982, get rid of 2,600 of the 3,000 old-plant workers, and hire on 1,000 new workers with little or no union experience. The result was a workforce of 1,500, half the size of the 1970s, and with many of the most experienced unionists no longer employed. This done, Hormel imposed their drastic concessions package in 1984 — a 23 per cent wage and benefits cut that became the spark for the strike.

Agreeing to concessions had done nothing to save jobs. But the UFCW bureaucracy still refused to fight. Worse — at every point it actively sabotaged the P-9 strikers. Lewie Anderson, director of UFCW’s Packinghouse Division, began openly denouncing the tactics of the local as early as 1984. (26) In March 1985 UFCW president William Wynn “sent out a letter notifying all UFCW meatpacking locals that they should offer neither moral nor financial support for P-9’s ‘ill-advised’ campaign” (27) of picketing corporations with links to Hormel. And on 15

March 1986, they killed the strike. A P-9 local meeting had passed a resolution calling for unity between their local and the UFCW national leadership. Wynn “seized upon the resolution to order an end to the strike and cut off strike benefits” (200) something no one voting for the resolution had in any way intended. In May and June, the UFCW took legal steps to place the local under trusteeship. With the enthusiastic cooperation of the judiciary, it seized P-9’s assets, occupied the union hall and even went so far as to sandblast an internationalist, class struggle mural painted in support of the P-9 struggle. The betrayal was complete when they “signed a strike settlement with Hormel that gave scabs priority job rights ... And the 1,000 loyal union people were issued withdrawal cards, forcing them out of the union altogether.” (5)

Boss and bureaucrat together broke the strike. But the defeat did not go unchallenged. The best part of Green’s book is his documentation of the tremendous self-organization and self-activity of the P-9 strikers and the Austin working class, and the way in which this inspired mass working-class support across the US. Green provides pages of evidence showing that there was, in this self-activity and solidarity, the potential to beat back Hormel, setting the employer and the defeatist union leadership on their heels.

In response to the company’s attacks, spouses of the workers, “primarily wives and a few husbands,” formed the United Support Group. Two wives called a meeting in a park in September 1984, almost a year before the strike began, and 300 women and men attended. (13-4) In October 1984, the dispute captured the attention of Rogers’ Corporate Campaign. “When Rogers and his partner Ed Allen first came to town in October 1984, they were amazed ... [to find] several hundred women with signs and banners waiting outside to greet them. And rather than the anticipated fifty-odd union members, the hall was crammed with over three thousand P-9ers and family members.” (14-5)

Again and again the mass self-activity of the P-9 strikers pushed the strike forward. On 23 August 1986, one week into the strike, "a thousand strikers and supporters ... completely ringed the downtown block" containing First Bank headquarters in Minneapolis. More significant was their direct approach to other Hormel workers. Between 26 August and 31 August that year, 300 P-9 members went on a car caravan to hit every Hormel facility within driving distance. The strategy included "leafletting every home in the town, then lining up P-9ers in front of the plant, not to block entry, but to show their potential strength and to get workers as they came off shift." (63-4) At the large Hormel plant in Ottumwa, Iowa the 300 P-9ers formed two lines of pickets "along both sides of the road and extending 300 feet on each side of the plant ... The reaction was electric. Truck drivers making deliveries to the plant and others who drove by showed enthusiastic agreement with the ... P-9 signs ... From the dock at the rear of the plant workers raised clenched fists to show solidarity with the P-9 members." And after work, 80 per cent of the local's membership came down to the city park. Local executive board member Lynn Huston described the meeting.

One after another they [the Ottumwa workers] got up and talked ... A lot of them had tears in their eyes. They said we had to stick together, that it was the only way we'd get fair treatment ... Guys would say, I haven't always been a good union man, but I'm here to tell you that I've changed. About seven or eight said that they'd never been able to say the word Austin before without following it with the word assholes. They'd always wondered what Austin people looked like. Now, they said, we know that you're just like us. (68)

This was the great strength of Rogers' corporate campaign. In using a car caravan of dozens of striking workers, a powerful message of solidarity was delivered, far more direct and effective than any leaflet or newsletter. However, not all of Rogers' approach had this effect. There

were other aspects of the campaign whose long-run impact was to demobilize rather than mobilize the rank and file. At its core, the campaign was based on an assumption that the UFCW leadership would respond to reason, that management at Hormel was essentially rational, that much of the dispute at Hormel, as elsewhere, was based on misunderstanding, and that therefore the rank and file should structure the mass pressure exerted through the corporate campaign to appeal to the positive side of bureaucrats and businessmen, people who were essentially "good." Thus Rogers emphasized information pickets, consumer boycotts, and civil disobedience, as opposed to mass pickets designed to result in sympathy strikes, militant and large pickets in front of the struck plant, and self defence against the organized violence of the state. The corporate campaign was a step towards self-activity, solidarity, and the politics of class-struggle unionism. But it always stopped short, derailed by a naive trust in the good will of the powers that were confronting the strikers.

Immediately on becoming involved in the dispute, several months before the strike began, Rogers argued that Bill Wynn of the UFCW was a "reasonable man." (15) This left P-9ers who believed Rogers unprepared to deal with the real Wynn, a cynical bureaucrat who had no intention of being reasoned with, who did everything in his not inconsiderable power to wreck the strike.

Instead of using the consumer boycott as a tactic to pull supporters to the picket line — an effective and frequently used method of strike organizing — Rogers counterposed boycotts to picket lines, arguing that staffing the picket line around the Austin plant was very much a secondary activity. He argued for a "minimum number of pickets" (63) outside the Austin plant while the caravans to surrounding towns were being organized. This left the local less prepared than it might otherwise have been for a mass defence of their plant when the company, sheltered by the

armed might of several agencies of the state, began running scabs into the struck facility in January.

True, it might have made sense to "minimize" the Austin pickets if the caravans were travelling to other Hormel facilities to try to shut them down. But for months they were instructed to have information pickets only. It was only out of desperation, five months into the strike, that these changed to real picket lines, as the strikers began to realize that Hormel was determined to reopen the Austin facility with scabs.

When the information pickets were scrapped for pickets calling for solidarity and sympathy strikes, the initial result was spectacular. On 21 January 1986, 75 P-9 strikers closed Hormel's Ottumwa plant when 850 refused to cross their line. On 22 January, P-9ers had less success at two other Hormel plants. But the key was Fremont, Nebraska. If the P-9ers could shut the Hormel plant in that town, alongside the plants in Ottumwa and Austin, enough Hormel production would be affected that the company would be economically hurt. On 24 January, then, a caravan of pickets set out for Fremont to try and close the plant. "Then the executive board [of the local] flinched." They thought the attempt to shut Fremont was "too rash," that they had to show Hormel management some "good faith." By the time this decision was reached, the caravan had already set out. So they worked the phones all night to get the caravan stopped. In the months to come, many of those on the phones that night would see this as an enormous mistake.

Most cars and vans were contacted and instructed to return home. At least one van was missed. The 5 P-9ers in that van, not knowing that their executive had called off the picket, set up a line by themselves at 4:45 am on Saturday morning, in spite of the presence of 50 deputy sheriffs and the Highway Patrol. These five kept over 200 people out for 2-1/2 hours. The 200 went to the union hall instead of to work. There is no question

that had the whole caravan arrived, there is a very good chance that Fremont would have closed, and the Austin strike would have been immensely strengthened. The phones should have rung all night to build the picket, rather than call it off. But by looking to show "good faith" to the "reasonable" men of Hormel management, a magnificent opportunity was thrown away.

Green sees clearly that these events of 24 January were the key to the strike. Never again were the P-9 workers to be so close to shutting the three decisive Hormel plants simultaneously. But he does not see how this decision was linked to the logic of Rogers' whole approach. The failure to shut Fremont cannot directly be pinned on Rogers. In fact he was furious at the local executive for calling off the 24 January picket. But because the whole corporate campaign strategy was based on appealing to "reason" — exactly the argument used by the executive — Rogers must take indirect responsibility. Employers are not reasonable — they understand only the rational of profit and loss. The state is not reasonable — in a capitalist society, its only reason for involving itself in industrial disputes is in order to assist employers with their profit and loss difficulties. For strike leaders to appeal to reason serves, then, to sow illusions that management will listen to a rational argument, leaving the rank and file unprepared for the cynicism and brutality which is the essence of employer-side collective bargaining.

As an issue in the labour movement, this is a major point. There is a need to return to class-struggle unionism, a need to dispel any and all illusions which stand in the way of that return. As a criticism of this book, it is a minor point. For this account of a major strike breathes with the life of the picket line. It shows the deep humanity and heroism of ordinary workers in small-town America. It shows no mercy to a union bureaucracy ossified and corrupt in a way that is almost beyond belief. It provides powerful evidence that

the state in capitalist society is very far from being neutral.

The lessons of Hormel are there for all to see in this first-hand account. And in spite of the defeat, these lessons need not make one pessimistic. There are only a handful of former strikers at work in the plant today — more than 1,000 were driven out by boss and bureaucrat. “Nevertheless,” as one account recently reported, “in 1993, candidates from the relative handful of former strikers still in the plant won a majority on the local’s executive board, and a former worker at Hormel’s Ottumwa, Iowa plant, who had helped to lead a solidarity walkout of 500 workers in January 1986, was elected Local 9 secretary.” So don’t discard that “CRAM YOUR SPAM” t-shirt. It just may become fashionable again.

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