

ALAN v29n1 - Organize! A Look at Labor History in Young Adult Books

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influences of the ideological forces of a culture—textbooks, for example. Teachers and students can resist, assert alternate interpretations of history, and create their own meanings (Weiler 11). Historical fiction can become part of that resistance—especially when it contradicts textbooks, provides a different perspective, or gives voice to those not represented in conventional history. In some very real ways, these twelve labor history novels do serve in this capacity.

To this day, America has the least developed and most opposed labor movement of any industrialized nation. While this sad fact is not entirely the result of the vilification of organized labor in textbooks and popular culture, it is surely a factor. Anyon found that the textbooks "promote the idea that there is no working class in the US and contribute to the myth that workers are middle class" (Ideology 383). The virtual absence of the laboring class or union workers on television and in movies contributes to their marginalization. When American workers cling to the popular culture-fed delusion that they are middle class, perhaps their desire for union affiliation is muted.

The Novels

Given how sparsely labor is mentioned in textbooks, I was surprised to quickly find many novels and even more nonfiction books about various aspects of labor history. Because of limited space, I chose twelve novels dealing with mill workers, shirtwaist workers, and miners. Mill and shirtwaist novels exclusively involve female workers; mine novels feature male workers. I was especially interested in novels set from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s because this is a period in which some of the most important changes in American labor occurred.

Three overarching questions drove this research. The first is pre-union: What were working conditions? The second involves attitudes: What do laborers, bosses, owners, police, and others say or think about unions? Finally: What were the unions' goals? What were the unions like? What did they accomplish?

Mill Novels The two earliest books are set in the mill town of Lowell, Massachusetts in 1836 and 1845. Even though the young women protagonists are already laborers, they're barely adolescents. In *A Spirit to Ride the Whirlwind*, based on true events in 1836, we meet Binnie Howe, whose mother runs a company boardinghouse. The mills control every aspect of the women workers' lives. They're required to live in company-approved quarters and to attend church. There is rampant bigotry against the Irish workers who are largely denied jobs in the mills.

In *Spirit*, mill bosses set the clocks back so that women are required to work extra time each day. A "premium" system is instituted wherein bosses, but not workers, are rewarded for increasing the women's pace. When the mills are closed for repair or bad weather, the women are not paid. Conditions worsen as workers are required to tend more machines and to work more quickly for no increase in pay. Women can be fired on a whim for any complaint or for questioning a boss. If workers are fired or leave the mill, they are blacklisted in all other mills.

When talk of a union begins, some women are wary but intrigued, but many are horrified, describing unions as "improper, if not immoral, for women to engage in" (*Spirit* 168). The newspapers call unions dishonest. Despite this, enough women organize and hold a "turn-out." As women from each mill leave, they hold a rally where a woman speaks to the crowd:

There is little mention in these three books that the majority of shirtwaist workers were recent Italian or Russian Jewish immigrants. These two groups, who seldom spoke English, were often pitted against each other by the bosses who played on the immigrants' fear and racism. Workers of different ethnic backgrounds were frequently seated beside each other so that they could not communicate—having no common language. This also prevented them from organizing or from seeing themselves as allies (Dash 5).

Mine novels The history of miners' attempts to organize and resist exploitation is long and bloody. Some of the worst violence against ' laborers was committed by companies resisting the unionization of miners (Zinn 354). Mine workers in all seven novels register the same grievances: the working conditions were gravely dangerous, the pay was minimal and in scrip, the mine bosses regularly cheated miners paid by the ton by underweighing coal. Reminiscent of the mill workers in Lowell, mine owners controlled every aspect of the miners' lives. Because of mine locations, miners were forced to live in "company towns" where the mine owners also owned all houses, stores, churches, newspapers, and schools. The miners had to purchase everything at the company store—often on account which was settled with their pay. Rent, supplies, etc. were also deducted. Miners barely broke even.

The first five novels are set in the anthracite coal mines in Pennsylvania between 1897 and 1902. In *The Candle and the Mirror* set in 1897, Emily is a suffragist and labor organizer working in the coal fields organizing Italian and Slovak miners and their wives. Just as in the shirtwaist factories, mine bosses consistently pitted these groups with no common language against one another. As long as miners fought among themselves, they hadn't time to fight their true oppressor. The union organizers, Emily, Paolo, and Jan, speak to the miners in their own languages, although we are never told which union they represent. The United Mine Workers (UMW) and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) both organized miners in Pennsylvania. The IWW was the most radical of all unions, and despite its enormous influence on the history of labor, is never mentioned by name in any of the novels. Emily writes to a local newspaper about the miners' desperation:

The owners don't believe we'll strike. They don't realize how little the miners have to lose. Do you know that when the owners recently found out—through their company banks—that the miners were managing to save money to bring their families over from Hungary and Italy, they slashed wages. They figured the miners were more controllable if they had no savings! (*The Candle and the Mirror* 123)

Eventually Emily convinces the miners' wives to occupy the company store and destroy "the Book" of accounts, where the miners are regularly overcharged and cheated.

There is a brief mention of breakers—this was how boys as old as six or seven began their mine work. Their job was to separate coal from rock and slate and to sort the coal lumps as the mass of coal and rock tumbled down long chutes. The job was dangerous and back-breaking, and paid seventy-five cents for a 60-hour week.

A Coal Miner's Bride, also set in 1897, culminates in the Lattimer Massacre where 19 striking and unarmed miners were killed and at least 50 were wounded when their march was fired upon by the local sheriff and other "deputized" men. Focusing largely on Polish immigrant miners, we are again shown bosses who encourage segregation of different ethnic communities as a way to prevent labor solidarity—this time coupled with anti-immigrant bigotry. Immigrant characters are skeptical of joining an "American" union, although this isn't historically accurate. The UMW, of all unions, always welcomed all races and ethnicities understanding that unions wouldn't otherwise be effective. When conditions finally become unbearable, the immigrant miners strike. Their demands included raises for men who work underground, a reduction of blasting powder prices (miners paid for their own supplies), and a restoration of recently lowered wages. Unfortunately, we aren't given any information about how the strike was resolved. If nothing else, the Lattimer Massacre did greatly increase union membership in the mines.

Trouble at the Mines is based on a 1899 strike in Arnot, Pennsylvania. The story is told by Rosie, the daughter and niece of miners. After miners are killed in a cave-in, the men begin to organize to demand more safety measures. They worry about the backlash experienced by other miners who tried to unionize. " ... Those miners demanded their pay not be cut, the first thing the company did was fire the ringleaders to scare the others. And when that didn't work, they evicted people from their homes" (*Trouble at the Mines* 6). These were common tactics early in any strike or effort to organize.

Rosie's father and uncle are fired for trying to form a union, but the families hadn't yet been evicted. The mine owners claim that there isn't money for improved safety or raises (miners were paid sixty-five cents per ton of coal they mined). When the owners threaten to close the mine if the miners won't return to work, many want to return—even if it means that none of their demands have been met. This rips apart many families.

The famous labor organizer Mother Jones, often called "the most dangerous woman in America," who actually worked with miners in Arnot, appears in *Trouble at the Mines*. She encourages the miners to stick together and organizes the women to prevent scabs from going back to work. The women use pots, pans, and brooms to prevent any man from entering the mine. Mother Jones finds food for miners who have been on strike for months. Largely through her encouragement and the women preventing scabbing, the miners hold out for eight months and are eventually given a small raise and some safety improvements. She also encourages the miners and their families to forgive those who scabbed and to accept them into the union:

Dear friends, they were frightened. Frightened by hunger, frightened by sickness, they betrayed their brothers and sisters ... But we fought for them anyway, and we have won for them too. And now that we're victorious ... we must be as generous in victory as we have been faithful and brave in battle. We must forgive those who lost courage and fell by the wayside. (*Trouble at the Mines* 79)

The Arnot strike was marginally successful and less violent than others to come.

Breaker, set in 1902, is told by Pat McFarlane, a breaker boy. The story begins with a cave-in where all the trapped miners are killed, including Pat's father. After reminiscing about mine stories his father told him, Pat realizes that the mine owners are only willing to make changes after a disaster and this angers him. Pat can't understand why his father would never support a miners' union, which he incorrectly refers to as a trade union instead of an industrial union. This distinction may sound slight, but its implications were enormous for organized labor. No novel in the sample ever discusses the differences. Trade or craft unions (usually only for skilled, white, male workers) organized across industries, e.g., all electricians, all welders, etc. AFL unions were trade unions. Industrial unions organized within an industry, e.g., all railroad workers, all miners, etc. The IWW was an industrial union and its main legacy is creating a momentum for industrial unionism (Zinn 330). Trade unions made strikes virtually impossible. If railroad workers wanted to strike, then all the trade unions involved must agree and be coordinated and willing to support "unskilled" workers. This seldom happened and also left "unskilled" workers unrepresented. The miners' unions (UMW, WFM, etc.) were all industrial unions.

Throughout *Breaker*, tensions between Irish, Welsh, Slovak, and American miners are encouraged by mine owners. Interestingly, a new teacher arrives at the local school. The previous teacher "had drilled into her pupils that they should be grateful to the company for providing jobs and housing, a doctor and a school" (*Breaker* 63). The new teacher sends a different message:

You miners work longer hours and at greater peril than most other men. If you are paid by the car, the cars get bigger, if you are paid by the ton, the tons get heavier. If you are hurt or die in an accident, there is seldom any compensation. If you complain about poor working conditions, you will likely lose your job. If you refuse to buy overpriced goods at the store, you may be threatened or fired. Join the union and you are suspect, strike and you may be cut down by the Coal and Iron police. Your families suffer as you do. A few operators and rich railroad magnates control thousands of lives. (*Breaker* 62)

The teacher explains that workers were in such dire straits because they refused to organize on a large scale. As long as one mine was open, a strike at another made little difference.

The men decide to strike and John Mitchell, the UMW president who was invariably anti-strike, grudgingly supports them. The owners bring in armed guards to "protect mine property." The union leaders warned the workers not to "provoke the Coal & Iron police. Operators want the outside world to believe that strikers are dangerous, in order to get public opinion on their side" (*Breaker* 96). George Baer, the owner of the Reading Railroad, writes a letter to the newspaper to condemn the strike and the union:

The rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for—not by labor agitators, but by Christian men to whom God in His infinite wisdom has given control of the property interests of the country ... (*Breaker* 136)

This social Darwinism elevated to divine right was a frequent attitude of industry's owners.

Violence finally erupts. Sheriffs protecting scabs brought in by the owners were killed in a scuffle. Even though miners are innocent, they're correctly convinced they'll be blamed. In a common move, the governor sends in the National Guard to protect mine property and scabs. Never a neutral force, National Guard and federal troops were often used by mine owners to break strikes and to kill strikers. The strikers return to work and Clarence Darrow represents the miners in national hearings. Even so, they only win a 10% raise. None of their other demands are met.

Theodore Roosevelt: Letters from a Young Coal Miner is a bizarre and fictional exchange of letters between a 13-year-old miner and President Roosevelt regarding the same events as Breaker . Roosevelt appears sympathetic, but unwilling to help laborers. His sympathies are likely overstated given his well-documented apathy toward child labor and workers in general (Colman 40). This novel, like Breaker , concludes with the hearings after the anthracite coal strike in 1902. One of the miners' grievances had been that the weighing agents regularly underweighed the coal of miners who were paid by the ton. Roosevelt's commission decreed that if miners wanted coal weighed fairly that they must pay for the weighing agents themselves. This was a defeat for miners, yet Armstrong has her characters pleased with the decision. In actual history, Mother Jones, who worked as a UMW organizer, felt that Mitchell had "caved in to the demands of the mine owners because he was flattered by the attention he got from [Roosevelt]" (Kraft 43).

The final mine novels take place in Colorado. Set in 1911, Sebestyn's On Fire tells the story of Yankee, whose union brother was killed in a strike, and Sammy, whose brother is a scab. The story starts shortly after a strike has already begun. This novel paints everyone involved in the strike—miners, union members, scabs, owners, families, and townspeople—as violent thugs unmotivated by principle and only interested in how much destruction they can cause.

Even though miners have a multitude of legitimate grievances, Yankee wishes she could force the owners and the miners to "come to an agreement and stop this craziness" (On Fire 91). Throughout the book, senseless violence is committed on both sides. Even though we're never told the strikers' demands, we're told they're not met. The book ends as the strike ends and one character cynically says, "Mr. Ekert can tell his boys he won them a little something and they ought to get back to work. And Mr. Stoker can tell his bosses they didn't lose a thing, and ought to get back to their partying. I guess that's called ending" (On Fire 202). On Fire , a truly mediocre book, takes no real stand on unions or labor issues. The author seems to sympathize with the inhuman conditions, but then presents union members and leaders as thugs.

Jones's Frankie tells the story of the famous Ludlow Massacre in 1914. The novel begins as the miners' families have been evicted from their company houses because of an impending strike. Luke's father delivers milk to the miners' camp as they await the arrival of tents and blankets from the UMW. The situation escalates when some Greek miners return to their homes to retrieve personal possessions and are killed by the local sheriff after being arrested for trespassing.

Scabs are brought in from out of state. Mother Jones arrives to support the strikers and delivers her famous line "you've got to pray for the dead, but fight like hell for the living!" (Frankie 45). She tells the union men to encourage the scabs to join the union. After several months of the strike, Baldwin-Felts guards are brought in to intimidate the strikers. There is constant minor violence until the guards finally kill several miners and the miners retaliate.

The governor of Colorado calls in the state militia to keep the peace, although in actuality, the militias were never an impartial presence and were used as mine guards to protect the interests of the owners and punish the strikers (Zinn 355). Mother Jones is arrested. Escalating over the months that the miners and their families freeze in their tent communities, tensions come to a head. The Baldwin-Felts guards and the militia open fire on the tent communities and the few armed miners fire back. After spending an entire day shooting into every tent and at unarmed miners and families, the guards douse the whole area with kerosene and lit it afire. Many trapped families burned to death. Eventually 33 miners and their families were killed and hundreds were wounded. Even after this, the strike was not settled in favor of the miners.

While not as nihilistic as On Fire , the main point of Frankie seems to be that these are not black and white issues (although they certainly seem very straightforward both in history and in this novell—they're too complicated to understand fully and that there is good and bad in both labor and management. This may be more accurate today, but was a gross oversimplification at that time.

Despite the fact that these books can be applauded for examining the experiences of ordinary people as opposed to famous ones, it is unfortunate that the focus remains so tightly on the characters instead of the broader historical and economic context in which the novels were ostensibly situated.

Conclusions

Despite the fact that these books can be applauded for examining the experiences of ordinary people as opposed to famous ones, it is unfortunate that the focus remains so tightly on the characters instead of the broader historical and economic context in which the novels were ostensibly situated. What picture of collective action is presented? Generally, young readers are shown individuals—not groups working in concert. Novels do traditionally focus on individuals, but authors could have chosen to focus on individuals and/in the collective. Even when the workers are part of the union, they are still separate from the group.

While all of the novels focused on the monstrous working conditions, the miserable grinding poverty of the workers, and the callous apathy of the bosses, they all also deftly avoided any meaningful discussion of the inherent injustices of capitalism, class structure, and the belief in social and economic Darwinism. None of these novels makes any meaningful attempt to situate their narrative within any larger historical, political, or economic picture. The novels seldom examine in any detail the accomplishments or purposes of organized labor and they all miss the opportunity to examine the long-term impact that unions may have had on the laborers' lives. The only famous union organizer who appears is Mother Jones. Where is Eugene Debs? Bill Haywood?

The authors of these twelve books seem largely to be pro-labor although their specific beliefs aren't always clear. Therefore, none of the books are as informative as they might have been. But even with these drawbacks and their widely varying quality and appeal, these labor movement novels still serve an important purpose and should be used in conjunction with labor nonfiction. They can help teachers to humanize this facet of our history and to provide a different perspective than is likely to be found in history textbooks.

Perhaps students might compare labor novels with both history texts and primary source documentation. This would be a perfect opportunity for critical reading and thinking. Students would be able to act as historians and scholars of literature as well. Even though these novels are far from perfect, and even the best novels should never be used uncritically in a social studies curriculum, they offer a starting place for considering the perspectives of those whose voices are seldom heard. Or as Green suggests, students can use these novels to begin to examine why US companies "have insisted on such total control of the workplace and of the people in their employ and why private and state forces intervened so often against workers and their unions" ("Why Teach Labor History?" 5). Allowing laborers' voices to be heard can also serve to teach young readers that ordinary people working together can effect great change—even if it is often a slow process.

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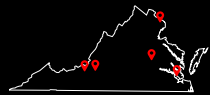
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