Brown on Kaunonen, 'Flames of Discontent: The 1916 Minnesota Iron Ore Strike'

Review published on Tuesday, February 15, 2022


Reviewed by Ronald C. Brown (Texas State University) Published on H-Environment (February, 2022) Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Printable Version: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=57000

Gary Kaunonen’s Flames of Discontent: The 1916 Minnesota Iron Ore Strike consciously forges an early twentieth-century history of immigrant miners, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) leadership, and their communities in the mines of Minnesota’s Mesabi Range. Dedicated to his “Grandma V,” and early twentieth-century experiences in northern Minnesota, Kaunonen’s account carefully describes the events that led to the 1916 strike in the iron mines, north and west of Duluth. He explains that the northernmost mines in the Vermillion Range were hard-rock mines where laborers sank shafts to reach the region’s iron ore. The middle range, the Mesabi, possessed the richest iron ore deposits, and its mines were among the earliest open-pit operations that used steam shovels to carve enormous holes into the landscape. Southwest of the Mesabi was the Cuyuna Range, opened last and possessing geological characteristics that led to both shaft and open-pit mining operations. As the mineral exploitation developed, typical mining communities (scattered settlements, company-dominated towns, and growing urban centers, such as Hibbing and Eveleth) emerged in northern Minnesota. Using a combination of municipal records, personal recollections, oral history, corporate records, family records, newspapers, and secondary accounts, the book captures a sense of turn-of-the-century life in northern Minnesota’s mining communities.

The volume presents a clear picture of a region much influenced by waves of immigrants recruited by mining corporations to Minnesota’s iron mining region, increasingly a crucial component in the steel industry that moved Minnesota’s iron ore to the steel manufacturing centers. Drawing on the insights of scholars William Cronon (Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West [1992]) and Rodolfo Acuña (Corridors of Migration: The Odyssey of Mexican Laborers, 1600-1933 [2008]), Kaunonen portrays a region of “contested workscapes,” occupied by itinerant, often single, seasonal laborers, men often attracted to the IWW (p. 40). The book endorses an IWW vision of complexity “nuanced with regard to ethnicity, gender, geography and mobility” (p. 70). Seeing his work juxtaposed to Melvyn Dubosky’s We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World (2000), Kaunonen emphasizes the importance that Finnish immigrants provided for the radicalism and coherence that marked the Minnesota iron strike of 1916. His discussion of the role of Work People’s College, founded in 1907 in Smithville, Minnesota, and nearby Duluth’s Workers Socialist Publishing Company establishes the important link between immigrants’ aspirations in early twentieth-century America and the intellectual and cultural institutions that the Finnish communities created. He argues that these ingredients were an important part of the initial success of the 1916 Minnesota strike.
He weaves together the events that undermined strikes led by the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) in the Mesabi in 1907 and Michigan’s Copper Country in 1914 as a backdrop to the Wobbly-led Minnesota strike of 1916. Ethnic rivalries and corporate coherence undermined these earlier WFM-led strikes. The Minnesota strike of 1916 briefly succeeded because the ethnic tensions were abated; the IWW sent ethnic organizers and prominent orators, including Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, to Minnesota; and the socialist-inspired Finns had created the infrastructure of meeting halls, the Work People’s College, and a socialist press that produced visually and linguistically focused propaganda that sustained the striking miners. Clearly sympathetic to both the Finnish and IWW critics of American industrial capitalism in the early twentieth century, Kaunonen develops a convincing case against the corporate leaders and details both the initial success of the organized miners and the ultimate end of the strike after two and a half months. Beginning on June 2 and ending in fall 1916, the strike ultimately foundered on the traditional forces of order: collaboration of government intervention, corporate recruitment of private guards, media that supported the owners, the links between the American Federation of Labor and local reformers, an anti-union media, and the state’s conservative leadership. The book details the sequence of events that pitted the activities of the IWW and the immigrant leaders in a traditional conflict with turn-of-the-century forces of industrial capitalism. Students of other labor conflicts in the mining regions will find obvious parallels with the events in Minnesota. What makes Kaunonen’s study so interesting is his obvious sympathy for the IWW and his careful discussion and documentation of the events of 1916. His work contains excellent photographs of the laborers, the working environment, their communities and protests, the IWW strike leaders, examples of IWW propaganda, and pictures of famous IWW leaders, such as Bill Haywood, Frank Little, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. His final chapter carries the story into the wartime era when the IWW was suppressed and the Minnesota miners’ successful integration into the United Steelworkers Union in the 1930s. Linking the past with the present, he concludes that “the fight for dignity, justice and solidarity that occurred in 1916 is essentially the same struggle we encounter today” (p. 217).

Though Kaunonen has written a bottom-up history, he does not make clear the extent to which the events of Minnesota followed other mining labor conflicts of the World War I era. Were the socialist Finns of Minnesota substantially different than other immigrant laborers in the West’s copper camps, such as Bingham Canyon, Bisbee, or Butte, or the neighboring Michigan mines in the Upper Peninsula? If the Finns were a distinctive factor in the Minnesota iron communities, what factors explain their concentration in the areas west of Duluth? Kaunonen’s experience as a documentary filmmaker explains his attention to powerful visual images of prominent Wobblies, the Finnish halls, the opera house in Virginia, Minnesota, and Finnish cartoons and other memorabilia that illustrate his interesting account of the 1916 Minnesota labor strike. This work describes the struggle of the immigrant miners, their collaboration across ethnic boundaries, and the role of the IWW in 1916 Minnesota as a force in this collaboration. It raises important questions for future scholars investigating issues of immigrant coherence and the role of the IWW in early twentieth-century America.


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