

'American Labor' Fails to Do Justice to Theme

Reviewed by Wm. Z. Foster

AMERICAN LABOR. Yale University Press. \$3.75.

Herbert Harris's new book, *American Labor* (Yale University Press, \$3.75) falls far short of being what it aspires to be, an authoritative history of the labor movement of this country. While occasionally it presents detailed material of value, this virtue is more than offset by the book's many glaring weaknesses. Altogether it is not a big contribution to an understanding of the theory, and practice problems of American trade unionism.

For one thing, the author goes at his task very sketchily. Characteristically, he seizes upon some high-



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light that attracts his attention and goes into it in great detail, to the complete neglect of equally vital matters. Thus, in his chapter on the railroad unions he uses up almost one-half

of his space to an extended review of the American Railway Union strike and leaves entirely out of consideration many other important phases of railroad unionism. And, although he devotes a full chapter to the Carpenters Union and another for the Newspaper Guild, he has none for steel. The general effect of such treatment is to make the book lopsided and to greatly injure its effectiveness.

Besides, Mr. Harris's historical judgment is none too good. For example, he grossly misinterprets the role of the Haymarket "Anarchists" and also of the "Molly Maguires." He says that Parsons and his coworkers in Chicago supported the eight-hour day movement only in order to propagate their "inflammatory" ideas and that they did the labor movement great harm. And as for the "Mollies," "they were a secret organization who killed mine superintendents, and other bosses, and 'long-haired' Socialists and weak and corrupt labor leaders, and wrecked trains and blew up colliers in order to get softer jobs for themselves and their friends, etc. . . . They also retarded the growth of unions to an immeasurable extent."

Such estimates of the Chicago martyrs and the "Mollies" have nothing in common with reality. Actually Parsons, Fields and the other Chicago militants were the most effective organizers of the eight-hour movement, its real leaders in fact; and far from injuring the unions, the eight-hour movement which they did so much to promote gave trade unionism an enormous impulse. And the Molly Maguires, despite their occasional terrorist tactics, were a genuine proletarian movement and they laid the basis for eventual trade unionism in the anthracite coal regions of Pennsylvania.

Mr. Harris manifestly does not like the Communists. He completely ignores the constructive role of our Party in its twenty years of life. When he troubles to mention the Party at all, it is only to mis-

represent it. In touching upon our activities in the unions, it never occurs to him that possibly, in addition to plans for eventual Socialism, we may also have programs of partial demands that correspond with the most urgent immediate needs of the working class of which we are a part. He sees the Communists almost exclusively as "sowers of discontent in the unions." Once, however, our immediate program does catch up with him and he, a mild supporter of the CIO, tries to explain it away with the ridiculous statement (P. 411), that "It may, indeed, be categorically asserted that any similarity between the CIO's political program and the current Communist Party 'line' is purely accidental."

The book is a curious example of American isolationism in labor history and trade union problems. For Mr. Harris apparently the rest of the world does not exist, at least as far as American labor is concerned. He does not trouble his head a bit over the international relations of the movement, and as for the present-day world dangers of fascism and war, they play no part whatever in his book. One would think that the American trade union movement lived in an international vacuum and was entirely uninfluenced by world conditions.

Also, the book develops a thesis of American exceptionalism. That is, Mr. Harris goes on to "prove" that Marx was all wrong so far as the United States is concerned. Marx's analysis just does not fit this country, so he says. A gauge of Mr. Harris's profundity in his attempts to refute Marx may be found in his assertion (P. 427), that, "In the United States, moreover the proletarians failed to emerge in any significant or long-lasting numbers as a home Americanus." Mr. Harris, himself, makes no effort to tell us what is the matter with capitalism, American and European; what is causing the mass misery, unemployment, fascism, wars and revolutions of today. But he leaves the impression that at bottom all is sound, and that after a little tinkering here and there the economic and political machinery of capitalism will go ahead successfully.

Jewish Film in Bronx

"The Singing Blacksmith," all-Jewish talking picture with English titles, starring Moishe Oysher and actors from the Artef Theatre, is having an exclusive showing at the Radio Theatre in the Bronx, starting today.

Matinees for "Big Blow"

Beginning on Saturday, Jan. 21, there will be regular Saturday matinee performances of "Big Blow," the drama of the hurricane country which the WPA Federal Theatre Project is presenting at Maxine Elliott's Theatre.

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on Armaments and the Struggle for Peace

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