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Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929 – Book Review

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Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929
by Dana Frank

Review by: Chris Friday

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importance to the changing role of history in the last decade, and its place in the quest of specific scholars. For if the 1980s marked an apogee in government deregulation and privatization, as well as greed, the period also witnessed the coming-of-age of social and cultural history, which often defined historical reality “from the bottom up” and challenged the axioms—and place—of white elites. In this context Hatamiya might have noted the place of Rep. Barney Frank (Mass.) in the gay liberation movement, and suggested an empathic connection in Frank’s indefatigable advocacy of redress. Finally, the author might have made more of the advocacy for Japanese Americans of historian Roger Daniels and political scientist/law professor Peter Irons. Indeed, the important international conference on relocation and redress held at the University of Utah in 1983, bringing together these and other scholars and former internees at Topaz, served as a key way station on the route to redress. That meeting certainly deserved mention.

Queen’s University

GEOFFREY S. SMITH

Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919–1929. By Dana Frank. (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1994. xii + 349 pp. \$64.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper)

Dana Frank argues that Seattle’s working people rode an unprecedented wave of power and control from the World War I boom economy to the early 1920s. During that era, not only did Seattle trade unions give some grudging limited support to unionization among women, African Americans, and Japanese Americans, they also sought to create a political economy controlled by and for the working class. Leaders of the Seattle Central Labor Council attempted to wield the “purchasing power” of union members to carry out consumer boycotts against “unfair” retailers in the city, to establish worker “owned” cooperative enterprises such as grocery and dry goods stores, barbershops, laundries, and theaters.

By the mid-1920s, though, when the postwar depression and employers’ associations combined to disable those tactics, trade union leaders increasingly turned to devices less threatening to employers in an effort to avoid the further erosion of their respective union locals. This meant the wholesale abandonment of efforts to link up with women and African Americans as well as very cautious attempts to create some detente with Japanese Americans to avoid competition. Moreover, the failure of earlier “visionary” activities led to the purging of most “left-minded” unionists. As a

result, Seattle trade unions primarily relied on the display of various emblems—buttons, cards, and labels—to encourage workers to buy union-made products. This protectionary strategy effectively linked the interests of employers to those of trade union members, the latter of whom were increasingly white and male.

Frank contributes significantly to the efforts of recent historians to go beyond interpretations of the 1920s as “lean years” for labor. Her careful consideration of gender and race moves the discussion away from top-down directives by conservative, business-minded national union leaders and places the point of debate at the local levels of leadership. Moreover, her focus on Seattle highlights the difference between western urban centers and the more frequently studied eastern and midwestern cities. Frank’s work points the way for similar questioning of the labor movement in other towns and cities throughout the American West and the nation. Those studies, though, will need to explore Asian American activities in greater depth than Frank in order to expand understanding of the attitudes and activities of local union members and to extend the discussion of race and gender more forcefully into the 1930s and beyond.

Purchasing Power will play a key role in an increasingly sophisticated literature on the 1920s, and it deserves a careful read by anyone interested in a precise, detailed analysis of twentieth-century labor, gender, race, and the urban West.

Western Washington University

CHRIS FRIDAY

The U.S. Navy, the Mediterranean, and the Cold War, 1945–1947. By Edward J. Sheehy. (Westport, Conn., Greenwood Publishing Group Inc., 1992. 208 pp. \$45)

This short monograph (100 pages of text without pictures, some blank pages, and footnotes) consists primarily of a detailed examination of U.S. Navy deployments in the Mediterranean during the early years of the Cold War and an analysis of the reasons for those deployments. Until the end of World War II, U.S. Navy deployments were crisis-oriented, concerned with the protection of commerce. After World War II, however, reversing the navy’s early post-war withdrawal from the Mediterranean, U.S. officials for the first time assigned ships to the region on a regular basis, undertaking a program of visits that gradually expanded into fleet operations.

Edward Sheehy demonstrates how the U.S., in reaction to the Soviet challenge of early 1946, pursued a step-by-step course leading