

EDITORS' REMARKS

The Popular Front

The popular fronts, which flourished briefly in the later 1930s, have had an uncommonly long afterlife that is not easy to explain. Despite the patent failure of the popular front governments in France and Spain, their spirit has continued to be invoked, in recent times by the Eurocommunist and Eurosocialist movements and during France's second socialist experiment. Part of this fascination with a past political experience results from a nostalgia for a time when issues such as anti-fascism seemed to be such a natural and compelling rallying point. The spirit which has continued to haunt the left emanates less from the political popular fronts of party and class alliances and more from the complex mass movements and popular mentalities of the thirties. Only quite recently have historians begun to investigate and sort out the varied aspirations and agendas of the diverse constituents of the popular front phenomenon.

Each of the short substantive essays in this issue commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the popular front probes one of its previously neglected dimensions. Martha Ackelsberg offers us an important and largely overlooked aspect of the Spanish popular front: the changing role and participation of women. In examining the perspectives and activities of anarchist women in Barcelona, she goes considerably beyond the old question of "war or revolution" to consider the gender-specific hopes and restraints experienced by women in a revolution shaped and led by men. Herrick Chapman looks at another segment of popular front grass roots, the skilled *métallos* of the French aircraft industry, to determine the relationship between the popular front on the national scale and its perception and effect at the workplace. He argues that workers in this strategic industry did not aspire to "escape from work," as has recently been argued, but were politicized by national events in ways that translated into "productionism" on the shop floor as the means of expressing their anti-fascism. But regardless of the ultimate fate of the popular front, he concludes, it helped to create a remarkable atmosphere of openness, improvisation, and worker selfhood on the shop floor that, for a short time, created unique forms of grass-roots participation. Perhaps most original and most unsettling of accepted interpretations of the Communist party's role in the French popular front is Irwin Wall's revisionist essay. Using the colonial questions as an illustration, he argues forcefully and convincingly that the PCF actually abandoned a popular front strategy for the *front national*, a gathering of all political forces from extreme left to extreme right, from the moment of electoral victory in 1936.

Although mass unemployment was at the center of popular front experience, the fate of the unemployed and their attempts to surmount it have re-

ceived little attention. Julia Greene's review essay of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement in Britain affords new insights into the genesis, growth, and high point in the mid-thirties of this unique mass-based organization (there was nothing comparable in any other industrial country). Greene's critique is particularly successful in distinguishing between NUWM activities such as hunger marches at the national level and the profound and varied impact these had locally in social and political terms.

That the popular fronts of the thirties on this side of the Atlantic had a significance greater than attempted class alliances by the CPUSA or activities in the major metropolitan centers is far from appreciated by Americanists and Europeanists alike. Two views, one of the South and the other of the West Coast, help to make important regional corrections to our common myopia. Michael Honey gives us a picture of the popular front in the South through the prism of Memphis, Tennessee. There, the struggle was over unionization in the emerging industry of this boss-ridden city, where no effort to change "the southern way of life" went unchallenged. The communist efforts to bring the CIO into the Memphis plants, the socialists' organization of tenant farmers, and liberal attempts to reform and de-criminalize municipal politics all ran into the stone wall of racism. In the South, Honey concludes, the popular front was interracialism before and above all else. Even when the sons of former slaves and former Ku Klux Klansmen could be brought together, such alliances proved fragile in the short run; they did prepare the ground for the destruction of "the old segregation system, one of the great historical bulwarks against unionism in the South." Bruce Nelson finds that on the docks of the West Coast a popular front of communists (insulated by 3,000 miles from the "third period" mania of party leaders) and radical longshoremen was forged as early as 1933. The ILA branch they created, syndicalist in spirit, peaked in the general strike of 1934 of 100,000 workers who shut down the Pacific ports. With the CP's formal shift to the popular front—translated into support for the New Deal, adulation of Roosevelt, and ultimate shift to the broad class alliance of the "democratic front"—the maritime unions trimmed their syndicalist sails accordingly. Even so, Nelson concludes, at the workplace and in the unions rank-and-file initiative and autonomy continued. Gary Cross draws our attention to the surprisingly neglected issue of worktime, crucial in the development of organized labor from the Haymarket to the popular front. With the deft use of illustrations from U.S. and European unions, Cross demonstrates the shift in purpose of short-hours demands from a reduction of daily toil to the attainment of leisure time. Though the latter demand was frustrated at the end of the popular front period, it has reemerged in recent years in Western Europe—a permanent legacy of the 1930s.

Fifty years later we continue to be challenged by the popular front, not so much to lay its ghost to rest than, in the spirit of these essays, to understand better why it still haunts us.

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