

United We Stand: The United Mine Workers of America, 1890-1990, by Maier B. Fox. Washington, DC: United Mine Workers of America, 1990. vii, 609 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$25.00 cloth.

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There are a number of daunting tasks one can set for oneself as a historian, but most intimidating of all may be the chronicling of a great institution. Maier Fox has taken up this challenge with more than a decade of effort directed at giving us a history of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). Two huge problems stand in the way of his success. The first is the sheer scope and size of the century-old union. It once truthfully advertised itself as the world's largest labor union. How does one introduce readers to the dozens of significant players in the century of industrial struggles of the coal miners, their leaders, the operators, the politicians, and the gun thugs? Fox accomplishes this with a seamless narration and polished prose that captures the reader's imagination while maintaining the detail required by the nature of the saga.

Iowans should have a particular affinity with the book. Their state contributed more than its share of leadership to the international union. That may not surprise anyone who realizes that Iowa was the sixth-largest coal-producing state in the nation in 1885. Most Iowans know that John L. Lewis, who spent forty years as president of the UMWA, was born in Lucas, Iowa, and spent most of his young adulthood in the state. Far fewer would realize that John P. White, another Iowan, was president of the international union before Lewis. Beyond that Edwin Perry, another Iowan, was secretary of the union shortly after the turn of the century. Another fact that should make both Iowans and the union proud is that George Edmunds, an African-American from Des Moines, was a national organizer for the union before World War I, long before racial equality reached other American institutions.

Maier Fox is the research coordinator for the United Mine Workers. Nevertheless, this work is not given to glossing over the union's errors, intrigues, fistfights, or failures. Controversial figures such as John L. Lewis are given their full portraits, warts and all. Still one cannot escape Fox's depiction of a century in which more than one hundred thousand miners died on the job, with countless others suffering injury to body and soul to fuel the industrial revolution in America. Fox traces among other things the century of struggle to control or ameliorate the increasing problems of black lung disease among long-term miners. We move from recognition of the disease in the nine-

teenth century to pensions for the lung-scarred veterans of the mines, to struggles against the Reagan administration's cuts in the black lung disability program.

Fox gives a surprising historical choreography to the relations of the union and the operators with the government as the third participant. Alliances are formed and wrecked. So, too, are friendships. Early union leaders were infatuated with government ownership of the mines. Not John L. Lewis. His ideological somersaults and those of the union were dizzying. At one time we find him and his predecessors calling their opponents "dirty reds," but later Lewis forms alliances with Communists in the union. Still later, he ties the union's fortunes to that of the financier and bank mogul Cyrus Eaton.

We are reminded again in Fox's book just how bloody and violent labor relations were in American life, especially before the Wagner Act was passed requiring bargaining in good faith. Murder, beatings, and intimidation were the order of the day as union organizers were gunned down in Pennsylvania and Illinois at the turn of the century, and in West Virginia in the 1920s. Mine workers shot down strikebreakers in Williamson County, Illinois, at about the same time. Fox manages to draw vivid pictures of these encounters. His scholarship and the sweep of his considerable knowledge always puts these events into the context of economic change, the mechanization of the work, and the changing political tendencies in this country. Fox shows us marred heroes such as John L. Lewis as well as the rare unalloyed distillation of evil, Tony Boyle, who followed in Lewis's footsteps. The current leaders of the union are shown to be honest, tough, and creative, facing hard times and a declining membership.

In the end Fox's book at once educates us and gives us the sweep and drama of the last hundred years in a largely successful labor organization. Fox's work is not only brilliantly executed and edited, it is what the Germans call a life's work. It is the rare reference work one finds hard to put down. It should be prominent on the shelves of libraries, schools, and the bedside tables of professional and amateur historians.

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