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**Review of *Three Strikes: Labor's Heartland Losses and What They Mean for Working Americans* by Stephen Franklin  
(The Guilford Press, 2001)**

Philip Eubanks

Stephen Franklin's *Three Strikes* puts me in mind of a line from an old Roger Miller song: "If you ever want to get depressed just come to this town." The town is Decatur, Illinois, of the 1990s, and it is riven by strikes against three of its major employers. Franklin gives us an impressively well-reported—if dispiriting—account of why none of the strikes turned out well. At least, not for the strikers. And certainly not for labor in the United States.

Indeed, what happened in Decatur, Franklin argues, is larger than many of us would easily recognize. He writes of the strikes' aftermath:

Maybe people don't notice the feeling of emptiness because Decatur's travail ended with hardly a whimper. No marches. Only exhaustion and disappointment that rushed in where frail dreams and stubbornness had lingered. But if you bothered to look, you could read the message the struggle left behind for America's labor unions, for the nation's Decaturs, for workers, for companies, for the rest of us.

In Decatur, American companies learned that they could step over the line and not get slammed for their indiscretion. (274)

If that were the only lesson from Franklin's book, it might be too depressing to read.

The strikes occurred at Caterpillar, Bridgestone/Firestone, and A. E. Staley, the agribusiness manufacturer that gives Decatur its distinctive corn-processing "aroma." In the decades before the disputes, Decatur had been a great beneficiary of its factories and its unions, enjoying both blue-collar prosperity and functional, though not uniformly tranquil, labor relations. But in the nineties, the relatively good relationships between workers and management began to crumble. That might be expected, given the emergence of global competition at the time. Yet Franklin sees more than global competition afoot:

[I]n Decatur the three global giants that were taking on the unions . . . were the reigning powers in their industries. They were not fighting to stay alive. . . . This was not the new global economics. It was the old rule of the strong making the rules. When the unions had the upper hand, they did the same. But those days were gone. (2)

Franklin is right about the bottom line. In the end, one side won and the other side lost.

But Franklin gives us more than just a chronicle of unsuccessful strikes and labor's decline. He shows us the texture of the strikes—how they fit into the complicated landscape of Decatur, Illinois and what Decatur tells us about the rest of the country. I grew up in Decatur and moved away in 1978. But I have visited family there ever since, and I was there during the strikes. I am genuinely impressed with the way Franklin captures the feel of Decatur during that time. For those directly involved, the strikes may have seemed to be epic struggles between fairness and unfairness, right and wrong, even good and evil. But, as Franklin shows, Decatur's attitude toward unions was—and had been for a long time—ambivalent.

Certainly not all of the union's natural allies took the union's side, least of all workers for whom high-paying union jobs were impossible to find. While those who had held union jobs since the 1960s and 1970s enjoyed middle-class lifestyles, others who didn't share in that prosperity were quick to become replacement workers, while some simply turned their backs on the unions' struggles. That's the Decatur I remember during the time of the strikes. The town was divided, but not just between management and worker. Old friends of mine—some of them white-collar workers earning something less than union wages—would roll their eyes at the mention of strikers' appeals for support. Help them? They were turning their backs on the good jobs!

Against that backdrop, the personal stories of die-hard union people are all the more poignant. Like the story of Larry Solomon, the president of the UAW, whose bookshelves in his Cerro Gordo home were lined with histories of the union movement, an unpretentious man who was “a symbol of the old ways of doing things, ways that had largely disappeared since American unions first took power in the 1930s” (9). Like the story of Ray Rogers, the reputed corporation slayer brought in to help with the Staley strike, a “workaholic who couldn't find work, a lifetime bachelor who was wedded to work that was no longer there, a believer in self-improvement who could not overcome the adversity he faced” (26-27). Like the story of Dan Lane, a member of the bargaining committee for Staley strikers, who ultimately went on a hunger strike and lost fifty pounds. Like the story of Father Mangan, who wrestled with his conscience and ended up chaining himself to a fence.

In Franklin's telling, the leaders of the strikes seem to have been born for these showdowns. They fought hard, all of them. But worker support for the long and difficult strikes finally waned. As the disputes wore on, workers' seeming lack of commitment left the union leadership wondering. Bob Hull, the vice president of Staley's local, went to a solidarity meeting at the UAW hall for all of those caught up in the town's labor

confrontations, and only 400 people showed up. He was stunned. He stopped, looked around, and quickly calculated that there were about 4,000 persons out on Decatur's streets because of the three disputes. And this was all that showed up on a perfectly nice day. Four hundred. It felt like a jab to his heart.

Here he was, he told himself, working so hard for this cause, and so few people cared enough to come to a meeting. Others from Staley had gone off and gotten jobs, good jobs too, and they were leaving him behind to fight their fight. (177-78)

Yet, as Franklin also shows us, if workers lost heart, there was a good reason. The strike took more than a financial toll. As one wife of a striker said after it was all over, "[H]e was not the man I had always known" (224). She found him in tears one day at the thought of going back to his old job. Together they decided he just shouldn't do it.

When all of this took place, I stood on a distant sideline. I had left Decatur long before. But my mother still lived in Decatur, and so did my in-laws. The strikes were often a topic of family conversation, especially the Staley lock-out (it wasn't technically a strike). My mother told me the story, once again, of something that happened to my father when he was personnel director at A. E. Staley in the 1950s. He was often too sympathetic to the union point of view, his boss thought. So my father was told he needed to make a decision: Was he management or not? It was an odd echo of the old union song, "Which Side Are You On?" But my mother and father never thought it was a matter of taking sides. In fact, they noticed an interesting pattern: Whenever the union got a raise, my father got one shortly afterward. Not everyone who benefited from the union was in the union.

During the strikes of the nineties, my mother sympathized with the Staley strikers (though not necessarily with the strikers at Caterpillar and Bridgestone/Firestone). Staley management was proposing 12-hour shifts that would change frequently from day to night. Workers would not know from month to month what days of the week they would work or whether it would be in daylight or darkness. This seemed cruel and oppressive to her. I agreed.

And I said so to my father-in-law, who saw things differently. My father-in-law was then a retired executive who had been with ADM, one of A. E. Staley's main competitors. He always prefaced his criticisms of the unions by saying that, overall, unions were a good thing. But he would complain that the unions didn't care whether their companies succeeded or failed. What was the sense in that? Without the company, no one would have a job.

He found some of the tactics particularly irritating. For instance, Staley strikers (my father-in-law probably called them "knuckleheads") had picketed the home of Patrick Mohan, the vice president who handled negotiations with the union. Mohan, as it happens, lived next door to my in-laws. One Thanksgiving when tensions were high, there was a security guard parked along the curb. We could see him sitting alone in his car as we ate Thanksgiving dinner. It was cold out. Finally, we decided to offer him a

piece of pie—which he accepted. After all, somebody said, security guards are people too. I agreed with that, too.

Franklin did not tell that little known story in *Three Strikes*. But he tells countless others, so many that it can be difficult to keep track of all of the union leaders, company executives, and striking workers who played a part in the disputes. Franklin himself seems to find the large cast and complex events unwieldy. He often shifts from thread to thread rapidly, sometimes without an obvious pattern. Yet *Three Strikes* is an engrossing book to read.

More importantly, it is an important book to read. Franklin cites striker Dane Lane's dawning realization that Decatur's struggles were far from isolated. Well, of course, I'm from Decatur, and I carry around Decatur baggage. I know what people mean when they say that people with jobs at places like A. E. Staley and Bridgestone/Firestone and Caterpillar should appreciate what they've got. And a strike at "Staley's," as Decatur natives say it (never just "Staley")—it just is not the same thing as a strike at Bridgestone/Firestone. And certainly not the same as one at Caterpillar. But, yeah. It's not just Decatur.