

*The Once and Future Union: The Rise and Fall of the United Rubber Workers, 1935-1995.* By Bruce M. Meyer. (Akron: University of Akron Press, 2002. xviii, 457 pp., photographs, index. Paper \$27.95, ISBN 1-88483-685-2.)

Bruce M. Meyer's account of the "rise and fall" of the United Rubber Workers is a welcome addition to the region's historical literature. It provides a useful overview of an institution that was once thought to play a critical role in the region's economy and unquestionably did play a central role in the lives of many individuals. It rises above that level in portraying the last third of the union's history, the years from the mid-1970s to 1995, when the URW became a symbol of industrial decline in Ohio and the Midwest. Yet because Meyer devotes approximately two thirds of the book to those years, he inadvertently creates the impression that the URW's "fall" was more important than either its "rise," in the 1930s, or the long period, ranging from 1940 to the 1970s, when it represented virtually all U.S. and Canadian tire workers and bargained aggressively to improve their wages and working conditions.

Meyer is a traditionalist in portraying the URW largely through the personalities and conflicts of its top elected officials, especially its presidents. His most important contribution is to record the URW's internal political history, as an ever-changing group of union officers schemed to control the international union. With a few isolated exceptions, personal ambition and a desire for strong leadership (nearly always defined in terms of personal charisma and assertiveness) were the driving forces behind this competition. Still, the results were generally, perhaps surprisingly, positive: URW presidents were uniformly hard working, honest, and responsive to their members' concerns. Unlike the CEOs whose salaries and perks rise regardless of performance, URW officials were acutely aware that they had to produce in order to keep their jobs. Critics might complain that their preoccupation with immediate problems precluded any sustained consideration of long-term goals or broader strategies, but it is also true that more secure, better known union leaders such as Walter Reuther and Philip Murray did not devote much attention to strategic issues either.

Assuming the relevance and value of Meyer's approach, the book's most notable shortcoming is its brief and cursory treatment of the first half of the URW's history. Meyer was able to draw on a relatively rich secondary literature for the 1930s, but faced greater challenges in summarizing the following period, which has attracted far less attention. His unwillingness to dig deeper into the labor history of the 1940s and 1950s, the union's heyday, or even to explore the tumultuous URW factionalism of the late 1940s, is a major disappointment. Since the activists of that era are rapidly disappearing, he might have called attention to the possibilities of that era before the mid-century history of the rubber industry and the URW is irretrievably lost.

Meyer is on firmer ground in addressing the later period. As a reporter for the *Rubber &*

*Plastic News*, he became acquainted with everyone who was involved in collective bargaining and union politics and utilizes his sources effectively. Like most of the union activists, he was captivated by Peter Bommarito, URW president from 1966 to 1981. An aggressive and occasionally ruthless leader, Bommarito dominated the URW as no predecessor or successor did. A classic union boss, he emphasized ever more lucrative contract provisions and the role of union militancy in achieving them. He also championed occupational health programs and research into the environmental sources of the cancers that killed many rubber workers. Above all, he was a shrewd politician who kept a close watch on the organization and his fellow officers.

Bommarito's command of the URW seemed to explain the union's formidable presence in the 1960s. Did it also explain the precipitous decline in membership and power that followed in the 1970s? The sputtering economy was a blow to the URW and the labor movement generally. Yet Bommarito, determined to keep pace with the United Auto Workers, was unrelenting. In 1976, he called an industry-wide strike, just as the manufacturers were confronting new and potent competition from foreign producers such as Michelin and Bridgestone. Many contemporaries believed that the strike was the kiss of death for the aging Akron and Ohio plants. But as Meyer demonstrates, Bommarito was wholly preoccupied with his own agenda, and hostile to any suggestion that it was no longer appropriate. When his "right hand man," the young president of the General Tire Akron local, refused to cooperate because of the likely effects on his constituents' jobs, he reacted angrily, as if he had been betrayed. Bommarito (and most URW leaders) considered the eventual settlement a triumph because the union won its principal demand, a cost of living escalator, which became (as they foresaw) a source of large wage increases in the following, inflationary years. In the meantime, all the Ohio plants closed, leaving devastated communities and blighted lives in their wake.

However one views Bommarito's career, it is clear that his successors faced enormous, probably insurmountable challenges. The unassuming, plain-spoken Mike Stone (1981-90) became increasingly unpopular as more and more locals had to accept concessionary agreements. Kenneth Coss (1990-95) was initially the beneficiary of Stone's woes, but he too suffered major defeats at the hands of Michelin (1993-4) and Bridgestone/Firestone (1994-5). The disastrous confrontation with Bridgestone/Firestone brought the URW to its knees and led to a desperate merger with the United Steelworkers. Meyer's account of the maneuvering that preceded the merger convention is first-rate reporting.

Meyer suggests but does not develop two other promising themes. He states in several places that the URW was probably the "most democratic" union and that URW members often treated their leaders badly. While the URW seemingly resisted the bureaucratic and authoritarian tendencies of many unions, including the Steelworkers, and every president except Bommarito was defeated for reelection or otherwise humiliated (Leland Buckmaster was removed by the executive board in 1949 but won the job back at the following convention), more information and analysis is needed to make these claims persuasive. Meyer, however, is on the

right track. Such an analysis, which would have to include the organizational culture of the URW in the 1940s and 1950s, might help to explain why it mattered who was president and how the URW influenced the industry as well as the employees who were union members.

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