

Loomis, Erik (2018) *A History of America in Ten Strikes*, The New Press, New York, NY.

Review by Gary Jones

In this ambitious book Erik Loomis aims to rewrite American history by putting class struggle at the center of the nation's story. The result is an accessible, lively, and incisive history of America based on recent scholarship that will be of great interest to those engaged in the inter-disciplinary field of working-class studies.

Loomis is an associate professor of history at the University of Rhode Island and the author of *Out of Sight: The Long and Disturbing Story of Corporations Outsourcing Catastrophe* (2015), and *Empire of Timber: Labor Unions and the Pacific Northwest Forests* (2015). His work has frequently appeared in print media such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Dissent*, and *The New Republic*; he also blogs at *Lawyers, Guns, and Money* and is active on Twitter.

His latest book, as the title suggests, is a history of America in ten strikes and a concise 229 pages of text: Lowell Mill Girls and the Development of American Capitalism; Slaves on Strike; The Eight-Hour Day Strikes; The Anthracite Strike and the Progressive State; The Bread and Roses Strike; The Flint Sit-Down Strike and the New Deal; The Oakland General Strike and the Cold War; Lordstown Workers in a Rebellious Age; Air Traffic Controllers and the New Assault on Unions; and Justice for Janitors and Immigrant Unionism. Each chapter centers on one strike and – as the chapter titles almost all imply – places the strike in the context of the broader issues affecting Americans at that time. Additionally, the book comes with 'Notes', an appendix, '150 Major Events in U.S. Labor History,' and an index.

Overall, Loomis persuasively argues that as the U.S. has been a capitalist democracy since the early 1800s, the best weapons the working class possesses are the strike and the ballot. Accordingly, when strikers demonstrate solidarity and workers elect friendly politicians to office, they have often experienced victories and progress that extends beyond the terms and conditions of work toward greater freedom, equality, justice, and democracy. However, when strikers demonstrate a lack of solidarity and workers fail to elect friendly politicians to office they have often experienced defeat and reaction. Indeed, Loomis views the current era as so reactionary that he terms it a 'New Gilded Age' during which, not coincidentally, the number of strikes has declined to historically low levels and the number of unfriendly politicians elected to office has risen to historically high levels.

In response to the New Gilded Age, Loomis argues that workers – among whom he includes himself - should 'combine organizing and solidarity with electing politicians who will fight for us instead of employers.' 'We cannot rely on others to fight for us,' he continues, 'We have to do it for ourselves in the streets and in our workplaces, at the ballot box and in our homes. The strike is the best weapon we have as everyday people to win our rights.' (10) Only through 'our combined struggle to demand the fruits of our labor can we regain our lost freedoms and expand those

freedoms into a better life for all Americans.’ His hope is that his book ‘helps us understand the paths taken and the paths ahead.’ (227)

Loomis’s book will certainly help us – readers – to do so. Nevertheless, readers will find much to debate about the book. Some will debate his selection of certain strikes such as Du Bois’s ‘general strike’ by slaves during the Civil War or the Lordstown Auto Strike of 1972. No doubt others will debate Loomis’s arguments about racism and white workers or whether or not the working class should work within the existing two-party system or promote a third party. Valid though such debates are, hopefully they will not prevent recognition of Loomis’s audacious achievement; namely, that he has published a compelling book that rewrites American history by placing class struggle, in the form of strikes, at the center, rather than the margins, of America’s past, present, and quite possibly, future too.

Intriguingly, although perhaps not altogether surprisingly, since *A History of America in Ten Strikes* went to press in early 2018 there has been a significant increase in the number of strikes in both the private and public sectors of the economy in both red and blue states across the country. Whether such recent increases signal the ‘revival’ or ‘return’ of the strike is uncertain, but as the late Joe Strummer once wrote, ‘the future is unwritten.’

Reviewer Bio

Gary Jones is Associate Professor of History at American International College, Springfield, Massachusetts. Most recently he participated in ‘Conflict in the Coalfields: A Roundtable on Strikes and Mine Wars in Early 20th Century Pennsylvania and West Virginia,’ 38th Annual North American Labor History Conference, October 20-22, 2016, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.