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Book Review

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1 **We're Going to Run This City: Winnipeg's Political Left after the General Strike**

2 Stefan Epp-Koop

3 Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015

4 xii + 197 pp., \$27.95 (paper)

5 Books about individual labor disputes in North America are rarer than one might think,

6 particularly when one moves beyond a narrow set of truly iconic conflicts like Homestead or the

7 "Big Strike" in Colorado. Rarer still are books that effectively attempt to uncover the legacy of a

8 strike, to trace its particular social and political implications. Stefan Epp-Koop's *We're Going to*

9 *Run this City: Winnipeg's Political Left after the General Strike* is just such a book.

10 The 1919 general strike in Winnipeg, Manitoba, is widely understood as a signal moment

11 in Canadian history. Although unfamiliar to many American labor historians, the strike has been

12 well studied by many Canadian historians and is the subject of at least five books and quite a

13 number of scholarly articles. Epp-Koop's contribution is to trace the history of labor relations

14 and politics in Winnipeg over the two decades following the strike. In so doing he enriches

15 discussions about the nature and extent of "western radicalism" in Canada, debates about how

16 "radical" the 1919 strike actually was, and, perhaps most importantly, arguments about the

17 consistency of parliamentary politics with Left-reformist and radical labor agendas.

18 Given this, Epp-Koop's book is actually less a history of labor, even at the institutional

19 level, than a political history framed around the aftermath of a labor conflict. For readers who

20 know little about the general strike, this approach has some frustrating implications. One is that

21 the book spends little time describing the events of that conflict or its principle actors. Another is

22 that, while *We're Going to Run This City* is very much a story about class conflict, workers

23 themselves do not figure very prominently in the narrative. Instead, the focus is on institutions

24 and key institutional actors.

1 Nevertheless, this is the approach that Epp-Koop sets for himself. And it is not without
2 considerable rewards. Readers who appreciated Thomas Sugrue's *Origins of the Urban Crisis*,
3 for instance, will find many things both familiar and edifying in Epp-Koop's detailed, highly
4 localized (albeit relatively brief) elaboration of the efforts of the Left-reformist Independent
5 Labour Party (ILP) and the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) to assert effective political
6 influence in Winnipeg. To a somewhat greater degree than their peers in the United States, both
7 the ILP (in its various decentralized iterations) and the CPC achieved electoral success in Canada
8 in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in the western provinces. In Winnipeg during this period a
9 representative of the ILP was elected mayor, and both ILP and CPC candidates served on the city
10 council. Epp-Koop chronicles not only how the parties managed these electoral successes and
11 how this was all influenced by the 1919 strike; he also describes the unrelenting struggles that
12 politicians from these parties faced in trying to serve in practically relevant ways while
13 remaining faithful to their political and social visions. Epp-Koop accomplishes this with cogent
14 narratives about the complicated inner workings of both parties.

15 While hardly unprecedented, this exercise is quite valuable for those interested in how
16 organizations like these operated on the municipal level and outside the immediate context of
17 particular, crisis-laden events like strikes. And not unlike Sugrue's book, Epp-Koop's study
18 offers a sobering—and for that very reason, very useful—account of the economic and political
19 realities that impeded the translation of political activism into effective reforms. Without
20 contenting himself with the reductionist view that such things are predestined, and without
21 discounting the real successes that ILP and CPC politicians were sometimes able to achieve,
22 Epp-Koop makes clear how little was ultimately accomplished—and how contingent these
23 accomplishments remained.

1 Key to this discussion is, of course, the resistance to reform from the Right. As Epp-Koop
2 also demonstrates, the 1919 strike played a key role in consolidating the political Right in
3 Winnipeg around a “Citizens Group,”{AU: Please add page number for the quote.} which, in
4 representing capitalist interests in city politics, substantially transcended the erstwhile
5 antagonism between the Liberal and Conservative parties. This kind of political formation is
6 quite familiar to labor scholars, having manifested itself during many North American labor
7 conflicts in the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, Epp-Koop’s documentation of it is both
8 effective and useful in demonstrating its pervasiveness. Indeed, while Epp-Koop does not make
9 this point explicitly, his discussion of the convergence of liberal and conservative politics offers
10 a useful basis for thinking about the limits of liberalism when it comes to labor rights and the
11 origins of neoliberalism’s hostility to labor politics and labor rights.

12 Also useful is Epp-Koop’s account of the role that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police
13 played in repressing the ILP and, especially, the CPC. Again, the overall story is pretty well
14 known to Canadian (if not American) scholars. But readers from both countries should
15 appreciate the way Epp-Koop localizes this story, showing how repression played out in a
16 relatively small place and, in the course of doing so, offering an important reminder of the often
17 intricate and complicated ways in which such things actually occurred.

18 Readers may not easily gravitate to *We’re Going to Run This City*, given its focus on a
19 time and place that preoccupies few Canadians, let alone Americans. This would be unfortunate,
20 for embedded in the book’s study of local and municipal politics in the wake of an important
21 labor conflict are transcendent insights about the realities of class conflict and the struggle for
22 labor rights in the twentieth century.

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