A Question of Loyalty: the American Legion and Striking Workers during the Interwar Period

Through the 1920s and 30s members of the World War I veterans’ organization the American Legion made headlines for their vigilante actions against striking workers. Images of Legionnaires in their uniforms beating strikers appeared in newspapers nationwide, while liberal and leftist media outlets criticized the organization for being little more than a stooge for American capital. The notoriety, if not notorious reputation, that the American Legion earned during the interwar period for its antiunion activities has obscured both the Legion’s more complicated relationship with organized labor and the motivations of its strikebreaking vigilantism. This paper argues that the hostility with which the American Legion approached elements of the labor movement in this period stemmed from its members’ fundamental concern about preserving a narrowly-conceived idea of loyalty within American political culture. Legionnaires believed that the nation’s exceptional democratic identity obliged citizens to avoid class-based political action. It was in the spirit of enforcing the loyal conduct of their fellow Americans, not merely in support big business, that the Legion allowed its members to intervene against striking unions. By doing so, the Legion put a conservative definition of citizenship into practice.

Legion leadership was not against the principle of trade unionism or the rights of workers to organize politically to address their common problems. They conceived of the place for unions in American politics in much the same way many Progressives had, hoping that the interests of labor and capital could be balanced. In this spirit, the Legion enjoyed a good relationship with the American Federation of Labor. Legion leaders also urged members to remain neutral during strikes in their communities. Legionnaires were only allowed to intervene when strikes were led by what they considered revolutionary elements or to preserve “law and order” for the good of the community at large.

Neutrality for the Legion was easier to preach than practice. Legionnaires interpreted what their leaders’ standards for intervention actually meant very broadly throughout the interwar era. In their actions they relied on a conception of loyalty that dated back to World War I, which cast activities that actively undermined the social and political order as open support for the nation’s enemies. As a result, Legionnaires imagined their vigilantism as legitimate interventions against agents of a broader communist conspiracy. They cast themselves as the defenders of the nation’s democratic ideals and the upholders of permanent standards of citizens’ obligations to the state and the national community. This idea that American national identity created limits for the civic and political conduct of its citizens was a powerful conservative idea the Legion helped to put into action in interwar political culture -- one that created hurdles for unionists and others in the American Left to prove their actions and ideals were not “un-American.”