John D. Rockefeller, Jr. and the Failure of “Liberal” Anti-Unionism

By Jonathan Rees
Colorado State University – Pueblo

The labor history dealing with anti-unionism that I know tends to focus on the stalwarts of this movement, people like Elbert Gary of U.S. Steel or Sewell Avery of Montgomery Ward. This reflects the tendency of historians to focus on people who attracted the most attention to themselves, and therefore may have had the greatest influence. Nevertheless, there has been another kind of influential anti-unionism out there ever since the labor question entered the American political debate - a less confrontation style of anti-unionism, one that actually made significant concessions to workers seeking organization even if those concessions generally fell short of recognizing the right of employees to join outside trade unions. While accepting this kind of paternalism is hardly an ideal situation for working people, it is still legitimate to call this style of anti-unionism “liberal,” even if only compared to the virulent variety that has come to dominate labor relations in America during recent years.

Because of his prominence, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. has to be considered the most important figure in this liberal anti-union movement. In the years following the infamous Ludlow Massacre, he (along with future Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King) championed the idea of employee representation (or company unions) as a means to prevent workers from joining independent unions. He started at the Rockefeller-owned Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CF&I), but he offered that example to countless executives in many industries as a better way to conduct labor relations than continual industrial warfare. Rockefeller intended his company union, which quickly came to bear his name, as a means to make the United Mine Workers useless by serving the interests of miners and steelworkers at CF&I so well that they would no longer consider outside unions worth the expense of paying dues. In short, he used limited industrial democracy as an anti-union weapon.

My proposed paper for UCSB’s “The Right and Labor” conference draws from my forthcoming book on the history of the Rockefeller Plan, *Rockefeller’s Cross: Employee Representation at the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, 1914-1942*. First, it uses private correspondence to establish that Rockefeller’s benevolence towards CF&I employees was motivated by his anti-unionism. Second, using previously unknown minutes of labor/management meetings held under the auspices of the Plan, it establishes how the limits which management placed on the power it ceded to employees actually inspired labor militancy (including strikes) and eventually the organization of CF&I employee by independent unions during the 1930s and 1940s. Lastly, my paper will use this historical example to suggest possible changes to present day labor law to further worker organization.