Tanner Billingsley

Title: “New Deal Radicalism: Roosevelt, Labor, and the Wagner Act”
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Louis Cantor

Tanner Billingsley is a senior with IPFW’s Department of History. Last year, he participated in the 3rd Annual Undergraduate History Conference, where he discussed the role of Mary Harris “Mother” Jones in the coal wars of West Virginia and Colorado. In 2011, he was the recipient of the Judie and Ralph Violette History Scholarship. This year, he received the Sharon Alt Piepenbrink Award for his research paper “Beyond Gender: Black Women amidst the Feminist Movement in the 1960s.” His current research interests include American feminism, the American labor movement, modern American conservatism, and Romania during the Ceausescu period. In his spare time, he enjoys reading and traveling to Massachusetts and Colorado.

Abstract

As a decade, the 1920s represented a conservative reaction to the Progressivism of the earlier twentieth century. Consequently, labor lost traction to industrialists and owners, who dominated the decade and profited spectacularly. Despite its reputation as a decade of prosperity, forty percent of the population lived under or at the official poverty level. When the economy collapsed in 1929 after years of laissez-faire economic policies, the working class was hit especially hard. Franklin Roosevelt, the nation’s new Democratic president, forwent Herbert Hoover’s dogmatic “hands-off” approach to the economy and instead pursued a more activist strategy, using the federal government to enact reforms and to directly spur economic growth. In 1935, Roosevelt signed the National Labor Relations Act, known as the Wagner Act. Perhaps the most radical, and controversial, of the New Deal reforms, the Wagner Act granted government protection to workers to collectively bargain—a crucial victory for a labor movement whose interests were largely neglected by Roosevelt’s predecessors. The Wagner Act provided federal protection for unionized workers, promoted collective bargaining, and established a strengthened National Labor Relations Board to protect and to regulate labor. Emboldened by the Wagner Act, workers conducted numerous strikes in the wake of its passage, demanding fairer pay and better treatment. Many employers, however, disregarded the bill and actively violated it, mistakenly believing that the Supreme Court would declare it unconstitutional. With the labor movement reinvigorated, industrialists, owners, and conservatives ruthlessly attacked the bill through an extensive but unsuccessful propaganda campaign. Ultimately, the Wagner Act represented crucial progress for workers amidst the Depression climate.