



**UNIVERSITY OF
ILLINOIS PRESS**

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Brass Valley: The Story of Working People's Lives and Struggles in an American Industrial Region* by Jeremy Brecher, Jerry Lombardi and Jan Stackhouse; *Brass Valley: The Fall of an American Industry* by Emery Roth II; *Banded Together: Economic Democratization in the Brass Valley* by Jeremy Brecher; *Rust Valley* by Mary Ollie Newman, Larry Rifkin and Jeremy Brecher

Review by: Seth Kershner

Source: *Connecticut History Review*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Spring 2018), pp. 65-70

Published by: University of Illinois Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/connhistrevi.57.1.0065>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of Illinois Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Connecticut History Review*

JSTOR

REVIEW ESSAY

Brass Valley: The Story of Working People's Lives and Struggles in an American Industrial Region, Ed. by Jeremy Brecher, Jerry Lombardi, and Jan Stackhouse. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982. 284 pp. Paperback (0877222711).

Brass Valley: The Fall of an American Industry, by Emery Roth II. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Books, 2015. 240 pp. 236 color photos. \$45.00 hardcover (9780764349300).

Banded Together: Economic Democratization in the Brass Valley, by Jeremy Brecher. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. 280 pp. \$95.00 hardcover (978-0-252-03612-5), \$29.00 Paperback (978-0-252-07806-4), \$26.10 ebook (978-0-252-09311-1).

Rust Valley, produced by Mary Ollie Newman and Larry Rifkin; written by Jeremy Brecher. Hartford, CT: Connecticut Public Television, 1990. 28 min. Digital version available through the University of Connecticut Libraries, <http://lib.uconn.edu/>.

“Brass is the life of Waterbury,” a business journal noted in 1869, “but for it the city would be no city.” Indeed, by 1880, three-quarters of all rolling and manufacturing of brass and copper was being done in the Nutmeg State, most of it centered in the Naugatuck Valley where by the turn of the century one Waterbury plant alone—American Brass—was churning out two-thirds of all brass in the United States. At its apex, Waterbury brass accounted for three-quarters of the city’s industrial production.

All that productivity was made possible by the thousands of manufacturing workers who toiled in the brass mills and smaller manufacturing concerns of the region. Their story, along with an industrial genealogy of the region, was first told in the remarkable volume, *Brass Valley*, published in 1982 by Temple

University Press. The book was a product of a collaboration between Jeremy Brecher, Jan Stackhouse, and Jerry Lombardi. *Brass Valley* embodies the ideal of writing “history from below,” accenting the experiences of those who so often are left out of the history books: workers, women, immigrants, and members of racial and ethnic minorities. As the authors put it in an appendix discussing the origins and methodology of the book: “We see this kind of history not as an academic exercise, but as a social act, a way people can communicate with each other about their experiences, needs, aspirations, and potentials.” (272) Recognizing the limitations of their own experiences, the authors established a Community/ Labor Advisory Panel—a group of professors, union leaders, and others who would help guide and proofread the work.

What comes through quite clearly in this exhaustively-researched book is that Naugatuck Valley’s history is marked by a series of workers’ struggles for greater control over their right to form unions, a shorter workday, and dignity in the workplace. The Knights of Labor were the first to establish a beachhead for the region’s labor struggles, forming lodges up and down the valley during the 1880s—from Derby to Winsted. It also led the region’s first strikes, helped elect a pro-labor government in Naugatuck, and published its own newspaper. By 1903, there were dozens of unions in Waterbury alone. But a series of events, including the violent denouement of a trolley strike that same year and the election in Waterbury of a pro-industry, anti-union mayor, led to decades of concerted efforts to keep labor unions out of the valley.

Among the dozens of illustrations and photos included in *Brass Valley* are those depicting the sorts of employee-welfare programs at major firms like Scovill—company-sponsored dances, clubs, sports teams, and other diversions—that were at least partly a means by management of inoculating workers from the union virus. The company also maintained a sprawling network of labor spies: stool pigeons who could be counted on to report their fellow workers for any pro-labor leanings.

Against all odds, workers organized. The most intriguing sections of *Brass Valley* detail the general strikes of 1919 and 1920, which together saw approximately 20,000 workers—mostly immigrants working in unskilled positions—walk out of their factories. According to a former Ansonia resident interviewed for the book, the strike “was apparently a spontaneous affair, spreading by contagion . . .” (79) The strikers of 1919 went on to voice such demands as equal pay for women doing the same work as men and an eight-hour day. As was common at the time, those workers who walked out were regarded by government officials as the most dangerous sort of subversives; accordingly, police made hundreds of arrests, investigators from the Department of Justice deported “foreign radicals” seen as the ringleaders, and the governor

dispatched the Connecticut State Guard to make a show of force in downtown Waterbury. Among the dozens of area residents to sit with the authors for oral history interviews was a former member of the State Guard who was on strike duty in 1919. “We formed a military square with loaded rifles,” he said. “We were told to shoot for the gut. That’s how close we got.” (80)

Facing down the guns and clubs, strikers won a partial victory in 1919 when employers allowed a modest wage increase. The 1920 strike went in the opposite direction, when workers were “defeated by a combination of repression and the economic power of the companies—the brass masters could afford to wait, while the strikers went hungry.” (89) It wasn’t until World War II that unions once again were able to gain a presence in Naugatuck Valley factories.

Brass Valley ends in the early 1980s, at a time when big employers like Anaconda (which had acquired American Brass) were winding down operations. By then, workers and residents could see harder times coming, as the wave of deindustrialization that would eventually leave the region in ruins was just beginning to crest. Increasing global competition placed strains on companies, which in turn tried to squeeze as much profit out of their labor force as they could. The availability of cheaper materials like plastics and aluminum also hurt the brass industry, and nothing was as devastating as foreign imports, which began to flood the U.S. brass market in the 1980s.

Observers had long fretted over the possibility of such a shift in the local economy. In 1918, the publisher of the *Waterbury Republican* warned of a future in which the area’s industries “might be gathered into the grasp of giant corporations . . . [so] destitute alike of local affiliations and decency of sentiment” that they would “cold-bloodedly close down many factories.” That remarkably prescient statement appears in Emory Roth II’s similarly titled *Brass Valley: The Fall of an American Industry*, serving as a caption to a full-page photo of a rusted workstation at the old American Brass plant. Roth’s book is an inspired series of photographic essays dwelling on the abandoned brass mills and other industrial ruins sprinkled throughout the Naugatuck River valley. His objective: to visit the “rustiest places in the valley” and “photograph what’s gone” (68). In the book’s best moments, it can recall earlier projects that chronicled urban industrial landscapes—of which Mary Procter and William Matusz-eski’s *Gritty Cities* (Temple Univ. Press, 1978) is perhaps the finest example. While Procter and Matusz-eski cast a critical eye on several northeastern cities where industry was in some cases still vital, Roth’s book stands apart for its focus on a specific region and its attempt to bring out the beauty of industrial ruins. In fact, his focus on developing an aesthetics of decayed rolling mills and fallen-down factories brings to mind Camilo Vergara’s widely-respected volume *American Ruins* (Moncelli, 1999).

As in Vergara's book, short essays sprinkled throughout *Brass Valley* take the reader on an at times meandering tour of Roth's mind. More than perusing mere photos on a page, readers of Roth's book will find anything from poetry to micro-histories of a particular plant to more personal ruminations on the artist's own entanglement with the region. Roth's book is essentially a love letter to the valley's glory years, when thousands of workers filled spaces now used primarily by pigeons and the occasional homeless citizen. Despite Roth's intentions to put a positive spin on things, by for example highlighting the few remaining brass works that are still functioning in the valley, the book can be read as a tombstone of sorts for a region that was once a dominant force in the brass industry.

For those who may read Roth's book and despair over the region's future, a new book from Jeremy Brecher offers a much-needed antidote. Brecher's book chronicles twenty years in the life of the Naugatuck Valley Project (NVP), a coalition of workers, clergy, unionists, and others which is based at least partly on the community organizing principles of Saul Alinsky. *Banded Together* tells the story of the NVP: the organizing strategies, key actors, and successes and failures of this valley-wide community coalition.

The NVP typifies the sort of community-labor coalition that began to emerge in the early 1980s. A May 1980 strike at the Waterbury Rolling Mills, a small shop that employed roughly 75 workers affiliated with the United Auto Workers Union, saw the formation of a Community/ Labor Support Committee. As discussed by Brecher and his coauthors in *Brass Valley*, this was the "first major community support for a brass workers' strike since the 1950s." (268) The Rolling Mills strike ended with success as management rescinded a proposed wage cut, introduced a profit-sharing plan for employees, and allowed a former UAW vice-president to be seated on the company's board of directors. According to Brecher and his co-authors, the success of this community coalition signaled that "new issues and new approaches will be necessary if the labor movement is to have a future." (268)

When the NVP was created in 1983, the need for such "new approaches" was clear. By 1980, fewer than 5,000 brass workers remained at work in the Naugatuck Valley, down from a peak of around 50,000 during the interwar period. As manufacturing ceded to the service economy, laid-off plant operatives looked forward to an uncertain, largely nonunion future. As Brecher puts it here: "Brass workers became gas pumpers and hamburger flippers." (10) In 1982, shortly before iconic clockmaker Seth Thomas shut down, removing another primary employer from the region, organizer Ken Galdston phoned Brecher and said he was trying to organize the community to do something about plant closings.

Brecher writes that he was initially skeptical about what such a venture could accomplish. But Galdston—who studied organizing in Chicago at Saul Alinsky’s Industrial Areas Foundation—proved him wrong. NVP eventually grew to become a “vital force” in the region that at its peak could call upon 65 member organizations—mainly churches, but also union locals and chambers of commerce—for support, held daily meetings at locations throughout the valley, and would eventually rack up a number of major victories for Naugatuck Valley communities. As he notes in the book’s introduction, Brecher had been writing and researching this book for twenty years, during which time he’d conducted scores of interviews with NVP activists and amassed file drawers full of clippings and reports.

NVP’s emphasis has always been on reshaping the market through social action; on the ground, this amounted to emphasizing the creation of worker- and resident-owned co-ops, such as Seymour Specialty Wire and Brookside Housing Cooperative (formerly known as Shamrock Ridge) in Waterbury, both of which come in for lengthy analysis in *Banded Together*. Interestingly, Brecher notes that NVP was quicker to generate interest and community support in smaller towns and cities of the region. Take, for example, Seymour.

In 1984, when closure of the century-old Seymour Manufacturing Company seemed imminent, NVP organized to shepherd the plant’s employees through a worker buyout. To raise capital for the buyout, workers had agreed to take a 10 percent pay cut—a small sacrifice, given that the restructuring allowed nearly two-hundred jobs to remain in the area. The worker-owned factory, renamed Seymour Specialty Wire (SSW), earned national attention. For Brecher the story perfectly encapsulates the NVP’s organizing principle—“economic democratization from below,” in Brecher’s terms—which consists of “organizing people at the grassroots level,” helping to include them more in the “ownership and control of productive wealth,” and thereby breaking up the “undemocratic concentrations of power and resources” in society. (xxii)

According to Brecher, Seymour Specialty Wire was the “largest democratically owned industrial firm in the nation from 1984 to 1991.” (xvi) While its ultimate demise can be partly explained by market forces (SSW’s fate was bound up with that of the auto industry), Brecher also notes how workers could have been better-educated about what co-ownership entailed. Too many workers, he notes, expected to have an equal say in how the plant would be run after the buyout; dashed hopes led to fractious labor-management relations.

The story of the NVP’s involvement in Seymour and other valley communities during the 1980s is presented in *Rust Valley*, an engaging documentary produced for Connecticut Public Television in 1990. At the time the film aired, Brecher was working with Connecticut Public Television as a “scholar in

residence,” all in keeping with the spirit of the “history from below” ideal, of course, with its emphasis on making historical research accessible to as broad an audience as possible.

Rust Valley puts faces to names that are central to the story Brecher tells in *Banded Together*. The film also airs critiques of NVP that are unfortunately missing from Brecher’s book. For example, one economic-development official notes that NVP should not have focused solely on worker buyouts, since the kinds of companies that are usually targeted for such actions are already on the brink of closure and in a fairly weak market position. If worker buyouts only delay the inevitable closure of a plant, doesn’t it make sense to put NVP’s limited resources into other kinds of actions? While each of the chapters in *Banded Together* addresses the strengths and weaknesses of a particular NVP campaign, Brecher tends to shy away from this sort of broader critique. However, given the high “fail” rate of the NVP’s buyout campaigns—Seymour, after all, was the only clear “win” out of two-dozen such worker buyouts that NVP seriously explored—such concerns deserved greater elaboration in the book.

While some of the higher-profile campaigns like SSW failed to sustain themselves over the long haul, others were more successful. In fact, more than two full pages in the introduction to *Banded Together* offer brief descriptions of some of the most notable: from lobbying for a grocery store in a food desert of Naugatuck, to tenant organizing in Waterbury’s Berkeley Heights public-housing project, to helping win back benefits for retired Uniroyal Rubber workers. But perhaps the best way to judge the success of NVP’s campaigns is by looking at the important but hard-to-quantify impact of organizing on those involved. In a particularly affecting scene from *Rust Valley* the interviewer is talking with Waterbury resident, Henrietta Norman, about how she changed after getting involved in an NVP tenants-organizing campaign: “I learned not to accept whatever someone says. Normally I would have said, ‘OK, this is the way it is—I have to accept it.’ Now I know I don’t have to accept it.” Norman, an African-American single mother at the time the film was made, later served as president of NVP. This kind of empowerment illustrates the nature and the necessity of organizing for economic democratization—the kind of organizing that will surely be a boon to Brass Valley communities in the years ahead.

SETH KERSHNER

Northwestern Connecticut Community College