

way for a parade of disillusioning policies and practical, usually opportunistic, 'turns', all of which meant that Bob and Queenie Laxer's heartfelt commitment to revolutionary social transformation was destined to be stillborn. What their children lived through as a consequence is at times quite sad. There is no doubt that it colours the depiction of communism and individual communists in this book, where what remains most poignant in recollection is place and family, and where what seems distant and distorted are the politics that had promised a wider authenticity, encircling all of humanity. Would that it could have been different.

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Irwin Silber, *Press Box Red: The Story of Lester Rodney, The Communist Who Helped Break the Color Line in American Sports* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

Professional baseball has a long-documented history of racial bigotry. This history runs contrary to two of the great myths on which the game has always relied. First, that in sport, every effort consistent with sportsmanship must be spent to achieve victory – to run faster and leap higher. Second, that in business, for the pursuit of profits one must be indifferent to emotive inclination that can potentially distract one from achieving the bottom line. The ultimate objective therefore is to win championships and market share. However, the Jim Crow laws against black athletes that began to fall in 1947 and the prejudices that have since persisted belie these conventions. Major League Baseball sells the colourful eccentricity of its athletes, both on and off the field, who supposedly adhere or adhered to these sporting and economic principles. Individuals such as Babe Ruth, Pete Rose, Bill Veeck, and George Steinbrenner, some of American baseball's most beloved characters and icons, have personified the ideals of competition and success. The myths that these characters embody are so powerful that the meaning of baseball's colour barrier is difficult to grasp, as participants and observers alike evince a preference for the comfort of shared prejudice over the basic rigours of unfettered competition.

The story of the Negro Leagues and the black players who could have gone on to be remembered as some of the best baseballers in history if they had only been given the chance by their white major league counterparts, is a well-documented one, both in academe and in popular media. Thus, one might imagine that *Press Box Red*, a collection of interviews with the largely

unknown Lester Rodney, is merely a typical critique of American Major League Baseball's bigoted past. In fact, this book is a crisp reminder that the golden age of baseball and pro-sports in America in general was not nearly as simple as many would like to believe. Perhaps more importantly, this book is a testimony that sport has always been a matter of deep social significance and that the never-ending battle for social justice can be successfully waged from the most unexpected of spaces.

What makes this book of particular interest is that Lester Rodney was a "Red" – a communist who inhabited the New York press boxes and covered sports with a professional but extraordinary perspective. Rodney was not simply a commentator on what was perhaps the most significant American sports story of the century, the Jackie Robinson saga, but a catalyst. The Robinson story as usually told, justifiably credits Brooklyn Dodgers President Branch Rickey with the courage and inspiration to break with the baseball establishment and end the major leagues' long-standing ban on African American players. In 1945, Rickey approached Jackie Robinson, a brilliant collegiate athlete, to lead the integration of baseball. Over the next two years, the first in the minor leagues at Montreal and then in 1947 with the celebrated Brooklyn Dodgers, Robinson created one of the most illustrious legends in American history, prevailing in his performance on the field and opening the gates for African-American athletes not just in baseball, but across the sporting spectrum. More importantly, Rickey's initiative and Robinson's courage and strength, established an important precursor for the national Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Recall, baseball's integration happened a year before the US Army considered African Americans as equal.

However, the sustained campaign to integrate baseball did not begin with Branch Rickey and the Brooklyn Dodgers organization in 1945, but almost ten years earlier. In 1936, when most sportswriters and their papers remained silent about baseball's Jim Crow laws, Rodney had launched a campaign under the title "The Crime of the Big Leagues," that exposed the injustice and hypocrisy of baseball's colour line to American readers. Even more remarkable is that these Americans learned of this injustice through Rodney's service as the sports editor of the *New York Daily Worker*, the instrument of the American Communist Party. To Rodney, sport was not just another diversionary tactic of the capitalist bosses doping workers to forget the class struggle – "an opiate for the masses" – but an important component of people's lives and culture. This book assiduously demonstrates that Rodney did not write simple accounts of the sporting events he attended: he also emphasized the social issues that surrounded these games.

Following the directives of the Communist Third International, in which Party members were urged to form a "popular front" with other forces on the political left, Rodney could not have identified a better way to court a working-

class readership than to highlight coverage of baseball – including the exploits of the then marginalized Negro Leagues. Rather than clubbing the readership over the head with dogmatic and propaganda-laden dispatches, Rodney, a working journalist and a full-fledged and accepted member of the Baseball and Basketball Writers' Association, won acceptance and respect from players and fellow sportswriters for his broad knowledge of sports and his skills and honesty as a reporter. He was thus uniquely positioned to publicize the injustice of baseball's racist practices, while simultaneously enhancing the Party's visibility in what Party leaders hoped would be the fertile recruiting grounds of African-American communities.

Press Box Red demonstrates that since the Robinson story played itself out against the backdrop of the post-World War II Red Scare and repression of the Communist Party, the suppression of the Party's role in the integration campaign proved relatively easy for those who wished to portray Robinson's experiences as a harbinger of improved race relations. However, this book goes a long way to correct this omission and shows just how influential the *Daily Worker* was despite its limited circulation. Based in New York City at a time when interest in communism was at its peak, other elements of the Party apparatus picked up on Rodney's campaign and did much to popularize it picketing ballparks, organizing petitions, and raising awareness within the trade union movement for example. In essence, Rodney was keen enough to understand that sport could serve as a sort of cross-racial Esperanto, fostering a working-class consciousness that transcended racial divides. This is not to say that Rodney dogmatically perceived communism as a panacea for the ills of the world. Far before the Khrushchev report in 1956, Lester Rodney was critical of the Party's unwillingness to confront the darker realities of the Soviet Union. Silber shows that Rodney and other *Daily Worker* employees sided with the reformers who sought to wrest control of the Party from traditional hardliners. When the *Worker* was accordingly shut down by the old guard, Rodney, like many others, resigned his membership.

In the end, this book illustrates the stimuli that moved men and women of conscience like Rodney to join the Communist Party during the turmoil of the Great Depression. It demonstrates their rejection of the racism of the era and their commitment to social justice. The transgressions of the American Communist Party were profound and numerous, but its heritage was also a worthy and honourable one. The story of Lester Rodney personifies the best of this tradition.

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