

## Book review

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Diana Kelly, *The Red Taylorist: The Life and Times of Walter Nicholas Polakov*, Emerald Publishing: Bingley, 2020; x + 174pp, ISBN (hbk) 9781787699861, \$132.

**Reviewed by:** John Michael O'Brien, *The University of Sydney, Australia*

An admission! When I was asked to review this book, I had never heard of Walter Nicholas Polakov. A 'Red Taylorist'? How could that be possible? He was born in Tsarist Russia in 1879 to the Russian intelligentsia. Diana Kelly's book focuses mainly on his life after he emigrated to the United States in 1906. An engineer, he made a successful career as a consultant attempting to introduce the ideas of Frederick Winslow Taylor to promote 'power plant management' under the tutelage of some prominent Taylorists. He became an active member of the Taylor Society, and argued for the betterment of workers, which he argued could be achieved by introducing Taylorist ideas to industrial production.

From 1929 to 1931 he went to the Soviet Union. As we know from other sources, Lenin had been very interested in Scientific Management as means of industrialising the Soviet Union. By the time Polakov reached the Soviet Union, Stalin and his confreres were in charge. As a contractor for the Soviet government, Polakov was sent to so-called model factories. He was met with indifference, and then active hostility from the local managers. He was less than impressed with the process of replacing specialist managers with party functionaries who had no knowledge of production or management. In this, he preferred efficiency to socialist transformation under the guidance of the Communist Party.

Polakov returned to the United States in May 1931, where in the midst of the Great Depression, few engineers could get work. Kelly describes his confusion, bordering on disillusionment, with the realities of the Soviet version of socialism, although he never wavered in his core socialist beliefs. His sojourn in the Soviet Union had rendered him an undesirable radical in the United States. He could not return to his former well remunerated role as a Taylorist engineering consultant. He was *persona non grata* in the private sector industrial world. He became involved in a number of New Deal projects and eventually became a professional employee in the John L Lewis-led United Mineworkers' Union, and further attracted the interest of the Federal Bureau of Investigation until his death in 1948. He had a successful career in the union, particularly in pursuing the argument for, and implementation of, safer work environments and provision of health care. As a union official he continued to earn a relatively comfortable income until he was forcibly retired in 1947 with the relatively small pension of less than \$1500 per year.

Taylor has had a bad press from his critics such as Gramsci, Braverman and Zinn. They regarded Taylor as 'rabidly anti worker and unrelenting pro-business' (Kelly, p. 3)

Kelly's main argument, however, is that critics concentrated on the abstract ideas of Taylorism, rather than the various practical forms of Taylor's ideas that were promoted and implemented by a number of his followers. While this a fair point, it difficult to find much evidence of Polakov's socialism in the consultancy work that he undertook when he first entered the United States. Nevertheless, he continued to espouse the view, in his books and many addresses, that Scientific Management could benefit both manager and worker, as long as the primacy of the shareholders was not the prime consideration in implementing socialist, or other forms of, scientific management.

Polakov's sojourn in the Soviet Union marked him as 'red' in a period when the red scare was afoot. He worked on a New Deal projects, but in certain quarters these projects were seen as the manifestation of Roosevelt's 'communistic' ideas. It did not take too much to be a 'Red' in the 1930s, 1940s and beyond, and Polakov was the object of much attention from the FBI and the House of Representatives Un-American Activities Committee for the rest of his life. The section of the book documenting this attention is particularly enlightening. Kelly is to be congratulated for the very resourceful archival research she undertook in order to bring it to light.

I accept the central argument of the book that there were various manifestations of Taylorism, just as socialism and Marxism take a number of forms, but have a slight hesitation in accepting the book's characterisation of Polakov. He certainly was a socialist in his advocacy of Red Taylorism, but, according to Kelly's account, as a consultant he was careful about what he said and what he did. He 'came out' as a Red in the Soviet Union but was thwarted by the emergence of Stalinism. He was marked and penalised as a Red when he returned to the USA. Kelly brings to light the outstanding work he did as an employee of the Miners' Union. He was creative as a union official and worked hard to improve the working conditions of his members through the advocacy of occupational health and safety measures. Perhaps this was a manifestation of his socialism, but it is implicit and I found myself looking for further evidence in the book that Polakov was a Red socialist in deeds, if not in words.

Nevertheless, Diana Kelly has done a fine job in bringing this man into a brighter light, even if the early chapters are, perhaps, a little more laboured than the latter chapters, especially the pursuit of avowed Redness. Perhaps in another era Polakov might have been called a technocratic socialist rather a Red Taylorist?