

**An Interview with William Scott, Author of *Troublemakers: Power, Representation, and the Fiction of the Mass Worker*\***

*At the northeastern edge of Liberty Plaza I encountered a youthful-looking man in his early forties who was sitting on the ground, handing out flyers advertising his book. When I read the title, Troublemakers: Power, Representation, and the Fiction of the Mass Worker, I sat down and conducted this impromptu interview.*

*William Scott is an associate professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh. He's been sleeping in the park beside the other demonstrators since he first arrived on 6 October. A few days after our talk, he began to work at the "People's Library" as a volunteer. Troublemakers, published by Rutgers University Press, is his first book.*

**Rob Couteau:** What's your book about?

**William Scott:** It's about the way novelists portrayed mass-worker movements in the first half of the twentieth century. When I say mass workers, I mean workers in mass-production industries such as auto and steel, on assembly lines.

In part, it's also about a new form of power that mass workers discovered they had: one that didn't depend on union representation or political party representation. It was a power they derived not so much through the power of numbers but through their position at the workplace, on the assembly line. That is, when ten workers discovered that if they stopped work they could shut down a whole factory if they sat down, that was an enormous power that workers discovered.

This new form of power created a crisis for novelists who tried to represent mass-worker movements. What they were trying to do was to show that mass workers in their oppressed conditions on assembly lines actually did have a form of power that was not the conventional form that was popular in the nineteenth century – power through representation, power through political parties in unions – but rather that they had a kind of structural or material power from the workplace itself. And so, my book is about how novelists represented this new kind of worker and this new form of power. I talk about novels that tried to detail sit-down strikes, or acts of spontaneous sabotage, or, in general, direct action: direct democracy movements in mass-industrial settings.

**RC:** How long have you been teaching?

**WS:** For about eight years. I was at New Mexico University at Las Cruces for about two years, in the English department there. I've been at Pittsburgh for six years.

**RC:** How long did you work on the book?

**WS:** On and off, for about ten years.

**RC:** Who are the writers that you focus on? What's the main group?

**WS:** The most well known writers that I discuss are people like Upton Sinclair, Jack London, and Dalton Trumbo: those are some of the better-known writers. The rest of them have fallen into obscurity. When their books were initially published though, many of them were bestsellers. Some of the novels I talk about from the progressive era – the period of World War One – were bestsellers and were well known but have fallen into obscurity since then. One of the purposes of the book is to revive attention on these forgotten novels.

**RC:** You mentioned Dalton Trumbo ...

**WS:** Trumbo's novel, *Johnny Got His Gun*, was a controversial, famous antiwar novel from 1939, and I talk about that in the book.

**RC:** I forgive myself for not recognizing his name at first, because it's one of those examples of where the book title is more famous than the author.

**WS:** It is. They made of film of it, as well.\* It was a very popular book, used for a sort of peace propaganda: an antiwar, pacifist propaganda novel.

**RC:** Maybe you could mention some of the books and authors that have fallen into obscurity that you're trying to highlight.

**WS:** One terrific novel from 1939 that's out of print is by a woman named Ruth McKenney. It's about the Akron rubber workers, the tire workers, and their sit-down strikes in the 1930s. Cornell University Press reprinted it in the early Nineties, but it's been out of print for about twenty years. I would love to see that book put out again. It's a fantastic novel. I have a lot to say about it.

Then there's Thomas Bell, author of a novel called *Out of This Furnace*, which is actually well-known in Pennsylvania and around the Pittsburgh region. It's about the Pittsburgh Steel workers. That's still in print, but it's not very well known. Then there are a bunch of novels from the progressive era, writers who were affiliated with the Industrial Workers of the World: Leroy Scott, author of *The Walking Delegate*; another book by a guy named Ernest Poole, called *The Harbor*, about dock workers and harbor workers in the New York harbor. A wonderful book. Then a book by a guy named Arthur Bullard called *Comrade Yetta*, from 1913, about textile workers in New York: shirtwaist workers and that kind of stuff. Those are a few of them. The list goes on, and there are other novels that I could mention.

**RC:** How did the idea for this generate? Where did you get the idea?

**WS:** My doctoral dissertation and research was about leftist writers from the Great Depression. In the course of doing this research, I discovered there was a broader tradition of radical literature in this country. So, I wanted to do something that would be broader than just a focus on the 1930s. That's pretty much the origin of it.

**RC:** What gave you the idea of doing the dissertation originally?

**WS:** When I was in graduate school, I was interested in the history of U.S. social movements. I was in a comparative lit program, so I started off studying German literature and German philosophy, that sort of thing. Then I discovered there was a movement of radical writers, leftist writers, in the Depression. I had no idea who these authors were. The only writers I ever knew from the 1930s were people like Hemingway, Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*. But to learn that there was a whole movement that was organized, that had conferences, journals, magazines, and published all sorts of stories, poems, plays, and novels from this era: that just blew my mind. I decided I wanted to learn more about it and that it would be a good topic: an under-researched field, which needed to be looked at again.

**RC:** You discuss major authors, such as Upton Sinclair, who explore this theme as a focal point in their work. But do you also mention writers that we don't necessarily associate with this theme but who were, nonetheless, affected by it and who dramatized it to some extent?

**WS:** Pretty much all the novelists I discuss were authors who had a commitment to writing about class issues and the situation of the working class. So, it's hard for me to think of writers who took up that intent as a sort of peripheral or secondary kind of thing. John Steinbeck would be a good example. I don't write about him in the book. But he's a good example of someone who has a sort of side interest in workers' movements in this country, and he addressed it in some of his novels. *The Grapes of Wrath* is the most famous one. Maybe Dalton Trumbo is the most famous example of somebody. *Johnny Got His Gun* is not typically thought of as a book about workers. But in the novel, it's clear that the main character is there to be a typical example of a modern mass-industrial worker. Jack London is another writer who was personally a socialist and was involved with the Socialist Party. He didn't write a lot about workers, though, except in a few of his books. Maybe he's another good example of somebody like that.

**RC:** Jack London brings a lot of those issues to the fore in his quasi-autobiographical novel, *Martin Eden*.

**WS:** Oh, *Martin Eden*! Absolutely!

**RC:** That's an amazing book, isn't it?

**WS:** Yes! I don't write about it in my book; I write about *The Iron Heel* a little bit, which was a very popular book. And *Martin Eden* was, too; they were both popular books with progressives and with labor activists in the progressive era. For example, he was one of the favorite authors of the Wobblies: the IWW. In many ways, *The Iron Heel* was a prophetic book. It's a fantastic novel.

**RC:** You could say that many of his tales and stories that have to do with going to exotic places – such as to Alaska, for the Gold Rush – are about people who are *working*, trying to make money.

**WS:** Absolutely. Then there are his allegorical stories, as well. Even the stories about animals are often allegorical tales about human society.

Historians and sociologists will tell you that this era we're living in now, of big corporate capital, most resembles the period of the 1890s in America: the Gilded Age, the creation of monopoly capital. Big trusts, and things like that. It's the kind of capitalism that Jack London was trying to describe in his books. For that reason, I think he's a very contemporary writer, and the things he says are relevant to many of the struggles that people are having today.