

Chicago's Boss against the 99%

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Kari Lydersen, *Rahm Emanuel and the Rise of Chicago's 99%*, Haymarket Books, 2013

New Yorkers rejoicing in Michael Bloomberg's departure from office can be grateful for another small favor: they don't live in Chicago, where residents are stuck for at least two more years with an austerity-mad, street-brawling mayor who wields near absolute power over a City Council far more supine than the one we have here.

Bloomberg, the billionaire CEO, is rarely abusive in public. He speaks well of the city even as he helps friends pick its pocket. When defending neocolonial police action in communities of color, he doesn't gloat about it at least not within earshot of the press. Chicago's sharp-elbowed Mayor Rahm Emanuel is more like the schoolyard bully who brazenly steals your lunch and gives it to the rich kids. Think of him as Bloomberg's nasty little brother. Same pedigree. Different tack.

Kari Lydersen's timely *Mayor 1%: Rahm Emanuel and the Rise of Chicago's 99%* exhaustively traces the rise of Emanuel, a one-time Clintonista, former congressman and Obama consigliere whose mayoral victory in 2011 changed politics in Chicago from a machine-dominated satrapy where city unions had some small influence to an autocracy where community services were drained, unions frozen out or broken and city workers bludgeoned.

Like Bloomberg, Emanuel drastically cut library hours. He privatized jobs including cleaning services at O'Hare airport, which were then taken over by funders of Emanuel's election campaign. As with Bloomberg, he closed schools that needed help and even has his own anti-terrorism Keystone Kops unit, which played a key role in uprooting the local Occupy encampment.

Unlike Mike, he liquidated community-based mental health programs. These and other policies sparked a grassroots rebellion that has driven down his approval ratings to as low as 19 percent and clouded his 2015 re-election prospects. It has become clear to Emanuel's growing ranks of opponents that, as one protester told Lydersen, "It's not a question of whether the city is broke. It's a question of who the city thinks is valuable."

Chicago Politics

Despite its tradition of labor and community radicalism, Chicago politics has never been dominated by reformers. It's also been racially and ethnically abrasive, with the color line cutting through Chicago politics in ways that make New York's look like a Quaker meeting. There, as here, the finance, insurance and real estate sector (FIRE) calls the shots.

Lydersen's exposé of the mayor as an arrogant bully is perfect, and she succeeds brilliantly in setting the stage for the big question: if Rahm Emanuel (and by extension Bloomberg) do palpable harm, whose interests do they help? To a degree she makes the case. She shows Emanuel in his days as a top congressional Democrat playing footsie with the later-to-be-disgraced heads of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the government-sponsored mortgage giants that played a key role in fueling the housing price bubble that preceded the 2008 economic crash. She also covers his unwholesome relationship with a host of investment firms and his nefarious role as head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee in axing viable progressive candidates. It's a hefty indictment. I'd vote guilty.

What the book doesn't do is more tightly and instrumentally connect Emanuel to local and national corporate elites. With the Chicago area home to 25 of the Fortune 500 top corporations, just five are mentioned, and only United Airlines prominently. The other four are covered mostly in passing as incidental beneficiaries of the mayor's largesse. The agenda-setting City Club of Chicago and its grandees are mentioned once.

Still, it's one book, and it clears the ground for others. There's also no need to claim a one-to-one relationship between corporate needs and government policy. Often corporations disagree, or have conflicting interests, and the state has to play arbiter. It will be helpful if Lydersen's work stimulates others to explore the concrete relationships between city politics, public policy and business elites. If, as Marx argued, government functions as the executive committee of the ruling class, then how this executive body functions in practice needs exposing in great detail.

Sadly, no one has skewered Bloomberg with great investigative reportage as Jack Newfield and Wayne Barrett once did with Ed Koch and Rudy Giuliani. Some 800 miles to our west, Lydersen points the way with a terrific muckraking tale of palpable harm to the people of Chicago by a smirking prince of the Democratic Party's neoliberal Wall Street wing. Lydersen's exposé is a slam dunk about who's not empowered, who's fighting back and why. It should provide a useful point of reference in judging the direction of the new de Blasio administration.

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