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Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South

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it, on the other. English employees were thus mistaken to view themselves as "free" since in fact they were merely being controlled by employers through one of the many possible sets of sanctions.

An alternative explanation for the law's development consistent with the existence of a real distinction between free and unfree labor is that the paradox of the Master and Servant Acts is that they crossed that line in their treatment of employees' contract breaches. It is not that the Acts made employment contracts enforceable that is problematic, but that they criminalized breaches. Indeed, English employees developed their own contractual response to the Acts: formal "minute contracts" lasting only a minute. This freed employees from breach of contract actions, a development that has implications for understanding the nineteenth-century development of at-will employment in the United States.

In time the British legal system recognized the contradictions between the Acts and the common law notions of contract and resolved them by abandoning the contradictory aspects of the Acts. This suggests, I think, that the alternative explanation I have offered has some power. If one views the common law as an evolutionary system, the interesting question becomes working out how the common law institutions felt their way to vindicating contract principles. The English employees' arguments for equal treatment as a matter of contract law thus are both more understandable and freed from contradiction.

Despite my quarrels with the larger theoretical framework, however, the book is a major accomplishment, offering much even for readers unpersuaded of its macro hypothesis. It is an important work that belongs in the library of anyone studying labor history, the economic history of the nineteenth century, or modern employment and labor law in either the United States or the United Kingdom.

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Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South. By Robert Rodgers Korstad. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. 576 pp. ISBN 0-8078-2781-9, $55.00 (cloth); 0-8078-5454-9, $24.95 (paper).

Robert Korstad's *Civil Rights Unionism* follows the story of black laborers in the Tobacco Workers International Union, and unearths the tale of their city (Winston-Salem), their company (R.J. Reynolds), and, ultimately, the origins of a national movement for civil rights. Korstad's book succeeds where case studies sometimes founder, for it links local stories to larger national narratives. *Civil Rights Unionism* makes ambitious promises in the opening chapter and, extraordinarily, fulfills many of them.

Workers in TWIU Local 22 not only struggled for rights in the Winston-Salem factory, but "tried to change the arc of American history in the years surrounding World War II," Korstad argues (p. 1). This is no small claim, especially for a union struggle rarely cited by historians, a city often overlooked in favor of Montgomery, Greensboro, or other supposed birthplaces of the civil rights movement, and a decade (the 1940s) frequently considered mere prelude to the civil rights revolution. "Local 22 . . . stood at the nexus of at least half a dozen interrelated democratic projects," Korstad writes (p. 4). It struck not just at racism and poor workplace conditions, but also at a social formation defined by "the interpenetration of gender, race, and class hierarchies" (p. 5). The CIO, Cold War, Communist Party, New Deal, and Red Scare all figure in this story of Local 22. Korstad focuses on one city but tells a tale of America at mid-century; he leaves few themes in the scholarship on post–World War II labor relations and civil rights untouched.

Korstad weaves all these arguments into a textured narrative based primarily on oral histories that he conducted. He locates the civil rights movement's beginnings in the struggles of working-class southern blacks during the 1940s—not in *Brown v. Board of Education,* the Montgomery bus boycott, or even A. Philip Randolph's 1941 fight against wartime segregation. *Civil Rights Unionism* shines the spotlight on Reynolds workers like Robert Black, Theodosia Simpson, and Velma Hopkins, who, by the end of the war, found themselves "speaking for a national labor-based civil rights movement" (p. 253). They wielded the vote, capitalized on New Deal labor legislation, and wrestled with anti-communist hysteria. Poor blacks demanded rights and confronted the prejudices and paternalism of their bosses. A way of life hung in the balance. "They mounted a challenge that struck at the core of a social system

that had changed remarkably little from the turn of the century until World War II" (p. 297). Korstad argues that the later civil rights movement grew out of those chinks in the armor of Jim Crow that the tobacco workers pierced.

Civil Rights Unionism continues a trend in recent labor history that studies workers' experiences on the job as well as their leisure activities and cultural lives. Korstad examines the grinding assembly lines and sweltering tobacco rooms alongside a vibrant social world in Winston-Salem's black community that revolved around the church, music, and baseball. Factory experiences and city life both conditioned black workers to rebel against company policies. The union rooted its power in the black community as much as on the shop floor.

Korstad ties the R.J. Reynolds company's ascent in the early twentieth century to the rise of Jim Crow in North Carolina. White supremacy rested not just on disfranchisement, he argues, but also on labor control. Korstad coins a new term, "racial capitalism," for this familiar concept. Yet the narrative is so strong that the phrase itself often seems dispensable. "Racial capitalism" excluded blacks from skilled and semiskilled positions as it stoked whites' racial prejudices. Companies facilitated the racial division of labor and maintained race as an obstacle to unionism. White foremen became the "slave drivers of the stemmeries" (p. 112). Winston-Salem's political and economic elites erected barriers between southerners to "normalize" racial animosities, class differences, and gender hierarchies, Korstad argues. Such divisions ensured the prosperity of "racial capitalism."

It is not at all clear, however, that white southerners needed prodding to draw these lines. The South in the first half of the twentieth century was a place where racial prejudice breathed with venom, class barriers were deeply entrenched, and traditional gender roles seemed as ingrained as the lakes and the trees. Korstad belabors the point that racial, gender, and class hierarchies reinforced one another, and these differences may not have been anything the elite needed to "normalize." Still, *Civil Rights Unionism* is no tired tract on race, gender, and class. It sheds a novel light on this academic trinity.

Korstad's protagonists are often black, female, and poor. This alone lends the book a unique and refreshing perspective. His story begins with Theodosia Gaither Simpson, whose confrontation with a foreman at the Reynolds stemmery in 1943 helped ignite a massive work stoppage. Simpson soon found herself debating Reynolds executive John Whitaker, and her courage inspired many others to voice their concerns. A sit-down strike in June 1943 set off a decade-long struggle between workers and management—and began a longer battle between black southerners and Jim Crow. The sit-down lifted the spirits of black workers in Winston-Salem and altered the way they carried themselves, as the later civil rights movement would do for an entire people. The significance of the fact that poor black women had challenged Winston-Salem's biggest empire was lost on no one. In Korstad's hands, race, gender, and class are not abstract forces, but powerful motors of history.

For women like Simpson, tobacco plants offered higher wages than domestic work; more important, they served as social forums and granted a measure of autonomy that the home rarely provided. Women raised their voices in song, controlled their own work rhythms, and banded together to support one another, or to avenge sexually predatory bosses. These were some of the thousands of "quotidian ways to resist" (p. 114).

Korstad writes a history of the black working class from "way, way below," to borrow a phrase from Robin Kelley's *Race Rebels* (Free Press, 1994). Subtle resistance, or "infrapolitics," inhabits Korstad's narrative alongside massive protests and dramatic demonstrations, a perspective that captures the lives of Winston-Salem's workers three-dimensionally. The same cannot be said for the author's treatment of the black middle class. *Civil Rights Unionism* often depicts middle-class blacks and their organizations—like local politician Kenneth Williams or the Community Relations Project—as opportunists and obstacles to social change. They appear as lackeys in Korstad's story of white supremacy's "sophisticated and deliberate" metamorphosis at mid-century (p. 376). Black leaders collaborated with whites in power and secured more legal rights in exchange for the assurance that "racial capitalism" would continue—on the backs of the poor. To Korstad's credit, he does not merely criticize the actions of leaders like Kenneth Williams, but attempts to understand them. Caught between a forceful wave of anti-communism and a radical union in his 1950 bid for re-election to the Winston-Salem Board of Alderman, Williams could not remain neutral. He ultimately chose the side of the company over the union. This portrait is accurate but incomplete: it minimizes ways in which middle-class blacks may have struggled

and resisted even as they compromised. While the world of working-class blacks is recreated in fine detail, the author's depiction of those who compromised with Jim Crow lacks nuance. Middle-class blacks rarely risked their own well-being for that of the race; still, their predicament deserves more sensitivity than it often receives.

Despite that shortcoming, *Civil Rights Unionism* emerges as a model of the case-study approach. It tells the little-known story of Winston-Salem's black workers—and from now on, this story will be known well and cited often. This is a new lens through which to view the early black freedom struggle, and it colors the movement in a working-class hue. These tobacco workers, Korstad argues, cast the freedom struggle's first stone. Through the union, workers learned to fight for their rights as American citizens. Local 22 "did double duty as a trade union and as a laboratory for the practice of participatory democracy" (p. 230). Moreover, it joined "the fate of workers in Winston Salem to that of their counterparts around the world and of blacks throughout the diaspora" (p. 234).

Though these claims seem too lofty, the ambition they reflect is also the book's abiding strength. A full embrace of Korstad's arguments would imply profound changes in conceptualizations of the civil rights movement and American labor. With this revised perspective, one could see clearly that the freedom struggle did not progress smoothly toward legal equality, but experienced peaks and valleys, advances and retreats. It crested early with the union battles of the mid-1940s, then retreated during the conservative reaction of the late 1940s and early 1950s. *Brown* and the Montgomery boycott revived the movement in the mid-1950s, before it fell back at the hands of "massive resistance." It surged again with the 1960 student sit-ins, and hurtled forward with passage of federal legislation in 1964 and 1965. From this perspective, the Poor People's Campaign and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1968 sojourn to Memphis marked not a new direction for the movement, but the moment that it came full circle. And when King took up the plight of striking sanitation workers, he did not tilt the civil rights movement toward a radical future, but reclaimed its working-class past. To take the measure of Robert Korstad's arguments in *Civil Rights Unionism* is to cast the civil rights movement in this bright new light.

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