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Fighting against the Odds: A History of Southern Labor Since World War II

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more aggressive state. Politically, this has meant that “since 1993, Ukrainian unions have not been visible” (p. 165).

The book makes two important theoretical contributions. First is the author’s discussion of how labor weakness poses a problem for democratic stability. Second, the book is a model of inductive reasoning. Kubicek constructs interpretations in a careful and judicious manner on the basis of a panoply of facts carefully laid out. Thus, for example, he explains unions’ weakness through both structure (downsizing and restructuring following the collapse of socialist industry) and agency (the end of compulsory unionism, skepticism among unionists themselves about the utility of unions after communism). Kubicek never settles for easy generalizations. While showing how privatization has weakened labor, he also points out how both it and globalization open up new opportunities for the future.

Not that he sees much likelihood of a union revival. Labor, he suggests, has been so profoundly weakened that “although a particular union might [become] successful, it is harder and harder to put faith in a revival of a union *movement*” (p. 150). No panaceas are forthcoming. Even employee ownership earns cool consideration: “ordinary workers fared poorly in this bargain, as managers, classified as workers for purposes of these transactions, frequently were able to acquire real ownership of the firm” (p. 186). All in all, this is one of the most informative books on contemporary unionism in a globalized world that I have read in a long time.

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History

Fighting against the Odds: A History of Southern Labor Since World War II. By Timothy J. Minchin. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005. 240 pp. ISBN 0-8130-2790-X, \$59.95 (cloth).

Twenty-five years ago when I substituted for former Secretary of Labor F. Ray Marshall as keynote speaker at a conference in Mississippi dedicated to the theme of labor in southern history, Marshall’s own book, *Labor in the South*, served as the basic source of information for my

talk. His was then the only scholarly general history about labor and trade unions in the American South. Since then, however, there has been a veritable scholarly revolution in the writing of southern labor history, one undertaken largely by a younger generation of historians rather than the economists and labor economists of Marshall’s and earlier generations who had published most of the scholarship in the field. Among the leading historians of this new generation has been the English academic now teaching in Australia, Timothy J. Minchin.

Minchin has previously written well-researched and detailed monographs about the failure of unionism in the southern textile industry, how the civil rights movement and federal actions opened that industry to the employment of African Americans, the impact of equal employment opportunity on the southern paper industry, and, finally, how mostly African-American workers allied with environmentalists to win a strike against the German chemical enterprise, BASF, in Louisiana. Now he has combined his own research and writings with those of the new generation of young historians of southern labor to produce the first synthesis of the subject since the publication of Marshall’s book in 1967.

Minchin’s study differs substantially from Marshall’s. Marshall sought to tell the story of southern workers and their unions across a broad span of time, with an emphasis on the 1930s and 1940s; Minchin looks at the years from 1945 to the present. Marshall focused on institutional history and formal industrial relations; Minchin writes about workers outside the unions, lets them speak for themselves through the use of his own and others’ oral history interviews, and is as sensitive to race and gender as he is to class. In one important respect, however, Minchin’s findings resemble Marshall’s. Both scholars agree that southern workers who attempted to form or join unions were, to borrow from the title of Minchin’s new book, “fighting against the odds.”

Perhaps the single most important contribution Minchin makes is to reveal that, however distinctive southern labor history has been and remains, its development has not been divorced from the experiences of workers and unions in the rest of the nation. In many ways, his tale of southern workers in the post-World War II years foreshadows the fate of all workers in the United States over the second half of the twentieth century. Like their northern brothers and sisters, Minchin’s southern workers fought for

decent treatment and justice on the job, often turned to unions to secure a better life at work and at home, and resorted to the strike when employers denied them decent wages and equitable treatment.

Compared to workers elsewhere, however, those in the South found it far more difficult to build and sustain unions or to win strikes. The odds against them were overwhelming. Employers, whether southerners or northerners seeking lower production costs, refused to deal with unions. Local churches, community organizations, and, most important, local and state governments worked hand-in-hand with employers to keep unions out and to break strikes undertaken by unionized workers. Race divided workers, and employers proved adept at using racial animosity to turn their employees against each other. As Minchin tells the story, nearly every union effort to organize southern workers, whether smaller campaigns targeted at individual mills or large-scale efforts such as "Operation Dixie" to take on the entire textile industry, failed for reasons that union organizers and the CIO (and later the AFL-CIO) were powerless to overcome.

Unionization campaigns failed not because union leaders proved too cautious, too anti-communist, too racist, or too manly, but because in the South there was no simple way for organizers to finesse questions of belief, race, and gender. In the South of the 1950s and 1960s, unionists could not be "soft on communism." In the over-heated racial climate that prevailed, to appeal strongly to African-American workers, who were more favorably inclined toward unions than were white workers, was to alienate white workers, and to stand apart from the civil rights movement was to disappoint African-American workers. Simply to spread the union message was to risk violence from the KKK or local and state police agents. Southern employers, moreover, violated federal labor law, NLRB rulings, and legal decisions with impunity. Back wage awards, too often levied years after the violations that generated them, were, in the words of one employer, the tax paid to avoid unions.

Minchin tells this story fully and effectively, always distinguishing between those aspects of southern labor history that were distinctive and those that replicated broader national patterns. As he notes, the failure of Operation Dixie

"marked the end of the national period of union growth that stretched back more than twenty years" (p. 60). The year that the CIO abandoned its southern organizing drive, 1954, union membership in the United States began a decline that has yet to end. And it was southern employers and enterprises, Minchin stresses, who in the 1960s and 1970s "led the increasingly open anti-union offensive by U.S. manufacturers," a trend still continuing in 2005 (p. 148). Citing an observation by historian Bruce Schulman, Minchin writes that "by the end of the 1970s anti-unionism had . . . replaced racism as the South's signature prejudice" (p. 183). The triumph of civil rights and equal opportunity employment for African-American and female workers coincided with the decline of coal mining, steel, rubber, and textiles—eliminating economic sectors that employed many of those same workers. Firms that had once deserted the North for lower costs and a union-free environment now fled overseas, where wages were even lower and the threat of unions minimal. As capital fled the South, new sources of labor from Mexico and Central America flooded the region, taking work in the region's low-wage poultry and fish-processing plants as well as the remaining farms and fields. Just as has happened elsewhere in the nation, as industrial employment disappeared, interest in unions rose among public and service sector employees. Yet many southern states remained distinctive by enacting laws that restricted union membership for public employees or prohibited collective bargaining with them. Hence it comes as no surprise that the South in the twenty-first century has lower union density than any other region, and that the two states with the lowest percentages of union members are North and South Carolina.

Without annotation but with an inclusive bibliographical essay, Minchin relates all this in simple, direct prose. For anyone eager to learn why the South remains unfriendly to unions and what its history has to teach us about the plight of organized labor during the past half-century, this book is now the place to begin.

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