Industrial & Labor Relations Review

Volume 60, *Issue* 3 2007 *Article* 86

Reworking Race: The Making of Hawaii's Interracial Labor Movement

Moon-Kie Jung*

*,

Copyright ©2007 Cornell University. All rights reserved.

effective in deterring early exits from the work force unless they are accompanied by simultaneous reforms in the disability and unemployment insurance systems. In countries where the pension systems do not easily accommodate early retirement, the unemployment insurance and disability insurance programs often function as de facto early retirement plans. Moreover, even successful public pension reforms may not be sufficient to reduce the fiscal burden of public pension plans to more manageable levels if the rate of economic growth in Europe does not accelerate. As Reday-Mulvey observes, "the sustainability of decent pensions—whatever their design and type of financing—depends on the good performance of the European economy."

In this short volume—just over 200 pages—Geneviève Reday-Mulvey presents a wealth of information on demographic trends across Europe, much of it summarized in clear and cleverly designed graphs, and offers a wide range of policy recommendations for reforming public pensions and promoting continued employment by current and future generations of workers as they age. This book will be worthwhile reading both for students of public policy and for public officials interested in learning about the role of government in promoting employment among older persons.

Patrick Purcell
Congressional Research Service
Library of Congress
Washington, D.C.

Historical Studies

Reworking Race: The Making of Hawaii's Interracial Labor Movement. By Moon-Kie Jung. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. xii, 292 pages. ISBN 0-231-13534-3, $45.00 (cloth).

Hawaii was once conservative, but now is arguably the most progressive state in the union. That transformation, which took place in the years before and after World War II, is the direct result of the rise of an interracial labor movement. We have all too few examples of successful interracial labor movements, and because Hawaii dramatically illustrates the benefits such a movement can create, both scholars and activists need to understand the basis of its success. Moon-Kie Jung's meticulously researched historical examination of this transformation identifies a complex of factors, but stresses that interracial unions were created not through *de*-racialization, but rather through explicit recognition of and attention to race—a *reworking* of race.

A century ago Hawaii had only recently become a U.S. territory and abolished a system of indentured labor. The indentured labor system was not a holdover from a traditional feudal system, but had instead been created and enforced by capitalist firms run by *haoles* (a Hawaiian term that can be roughly translated as Anglos).

For a century Hawaii offered an exemplary case of class unity—capitalist class unity. "At first glance," Jung notes (p. 14), "Hawaii's sugar industry seems to have been a clear case of an industry with low capital concentration," given that even at the beginning of World War II there were 38 sugar plantations, each an integrated production unit. Production—and politics—however, were controlled not by direct producers but rather by the agencies that came to dominate the system. The "Big Five" agencies controlled 95% of production, and the Big Five were in turn controlled by a tightly interlocked and intermarried set of haole families. The "headquarters of the agencies all sat within a hundred yards" of each other and of the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association offices (p. 26), and they could all assemble at a few moments' notice.

The half-century of labor history after Hawaii became a U.S. territory in 1900 demonstrates a recurring pattern: workers were ill-treated. With minimal formal organization, large numbers of workers went out on militant and long-lasting strikes in 1900, 1909, 1920, and 1924. These strikes were not interracial, but conducted by one race alone, or workers organized into racially distinct labor unions with no formal ties to one another. The Big Five agencies responded harshly, and displayed tremendous capitalist class unity, requiring that all member plantations (not just those facing a strike) pay for strike costs, and in effect forbidding any struck plantation from settling with the workers. Strikebreakers, racially distinct from the striking workers, were hired even if they needed to be paid significantly more than the striking workers were requesting. Eventually the strike was crushed with no concessions, and without the owners even agreeing to talk to representatives of the striking workers. Not long thereafter, however, the companies, on their own, "voluntarily," introduced some improvements in wages and benefits. Despite repeated crushing defeats, workers struck again and again.

Beverly Silver's *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization Since 1870* (Cambridge University Press, 2003) identifies two processes that capitalists use to address worker unrest: a

spatial fix (moving production to another country) and a technological fix. Moon-Kie Jung's history of Hawaii suggests a third fix, a racial one: when Japanese workers become too militant, bring in Portuguese, and when they don't solve the Big Five's labor problem, bring in Filipinos.

Three interacting factors were important in changing this pattern: the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), and the construction of an interracial union. The NLRB, established in 1935, became a major resource for labor in Hawaii. In 1937, "the prospect of an NLRB investigation and hearing" (p. 116) led an employer for the first time to voluntarily recognize and bargain in good faith with a union. Workers were able to file charges with the NLRB; "the terms of class struggle in Hawaii had been indelibly altered" (p. 122).

The ILWU was perhaps even more important. Longshore workers were strongly affected by the militant character of the Pacific Coast longshore union, and some ILWU members who had participated in the San Francisco general strike of 1934 and other union actions on the West Coast relocated to Hawaii. Because of both their insightfulness and their politics, from the first moment that ILWU workers established a fragile toehold on the Hawaiian docks, an organizer convinced Port Allen longshoremen that they could not challenge the Big Five alone. They had to help organize the plantations. "The longshoremen concurred," Jung writes (p. 130), and so began the "march inland" to the plantations.

At least as important, the ILWU—influenced by Communist Party ideology—stressed the need for racial as well as class unity. Both academic scholars and political activists have posited that interracialism depends on deracializing workers' identity and politics in order to focus instead on their shared class interests. In the standard account, the declining significance of race facilitates an increasing focus on class solidarity. The "false consciousness" of "race" (which had historically divided workers) recedes and an interracial working class coheres around its shared economic interest.

By examining the *process* through which workers formed an interracial labor movement, Jung compellingly argues that we need to reconsider this understanding. Race, he finds, did not recede among Hawaii's working class. The labor movement ingeniously managed to rearticulate race in a manner that highlighted and reinforced workers' shared race and class interests.

The ILWU's ideology was grounded in the traditional Marxist notion that employers seek to "divide and conquer." But, the union's "class-based" notion of "divide and conquer" was coupled with a discourse of racial inequality and racism. The ILWU-led labor movement asserted that the haole capitalists had intentionally perpetuated racism among workers through segregation, racialized wage structures, and so on, to keep workers from organizing for economic justice. Capital was demonized not only for exploiting workers, but also for engineering and reinforcing a divisive racist hierarchy. This rearticulation of race cast non-haole workers as victims of capital's efforts to maintain an oppressive racial hierarchy—thereby facilitating capitalists' ability to economically oppress workers en masse. According to this new ideology, the new interracial labor movement was a watershed in Hawaiian history. By uniting Filipino, Japanese, and Portuguese workers, the labor movement, it was argued, could finally mount a successful campaign to fight the haole capitalists.

The ILWU made overt efforts to address racial differences and inequality on the island. This included recognizing and catering to the linguistic diversity of Hawaii's workers in union literature and meetings. Even more important, the ILWU consciously sought to create, indeed to insist on, leadership that reflected the racial diversity of the workers. At the same time, the union sought to forget, and to actively repress, the past history of workers' participation in the creation of racial divisions.

Workers were ultimately successful in creating a lasting interracial labor movement. But this interracialism was not the result of "deracialization," as is commonly assumed. Rather, race was reworked to emphasize workers' shared interests in challenging Hawaii's racist hierarchy and capitalists' exploitation.

This book compellingly presents a theoretical perspective regarding race and the labor movement that demands serious scholarly attention. Furthermore, it provides practical insights for those interested in organizing interracial work forces. Well written, impressively researched, and theoretically insightful, *Reworking Race* is an important contribution to the field.

Francisca Oyogoa, Ph.D. student

Dan Clawson, Professor

Department of Sociology
University of Massachusetts,
Amherst