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[Review of the Book *Meatpackers: An Oral History of Black Packinghouse Workers and Their Struggle for Racial and Economic Equality*]

Abstract

[Excerpt] The Halpern and Horowitz volume, *Meatpackers*, follows creditably in this oral history tradition, even if it does not approach the power and complexity of Rosengarten's work. Instead of focusing on one individual, the book presents selections culled from a massive collection of oral interviews conducted by the authors with more than 125 former members of the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA). The interviewees are black, white, and Hispanic, male and female, with records of activism in the union as far back as the 1930s and as recent as the 1980s. The events they recount occurred in five cities, four of them in the Midwest, that were important centers in the meatpacking industry (Chicago; Kansas City; Omaha; Waterloo, Iowa; and Fort Worth, Texas).

Organizing the interviews by city, and thus largely by UPWA local as well, allows for multiple perspectives that draw out the subtle and complex aspects of these working people's lives. A number of themes stand out. In these interviews, the harshness of the work is vivid in memory, as are the racial distinctions that gave black workers the worst jobs (before the union gained the strength to reverse such policies). Yet the underlying irony, recognized by many of those interviewed, is that those very same jobs provided a modicum of security and the possibility of intergenerational mobility for the relatively few black Americans who possessed them. Even more, the racist personnel policies that funneled black workers to the onerous and dangerous jobs on the "killing floor" actually made black workers indispensable to production, since without them the whole process would have stalled. A second theme, evident in comparing the accounts of the different locals, is the contrast between the initial organizing campaigns of fifty or more years ago and the more somber impact of plant closings and restructurings on workers' lives in recent decades.

Keywords

meatpacking, labor movement, United Packinghouse Workers of America, UPWA, worker rights, union organizing

Disciplines

African American Studies | Labor History | Labor Relations | Unions

Comments

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Roger Horowitz. New York: Twayne (an imprint of Simon & Schuster Macmillan), 1996. 176 pp. ISBN 0-8057-9120 5, \$28.95 (cloth).

Recent decades have seen a welcome expansion of efforts by historians to explore the experiences of African-American working men and women in post-slavery American life. Some of these historians, such as Eric Arnesen (in *Waterfront Workers in New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923*), focus rather specifically on the work life of their historical subjects; others, such as Robin D. G. Kelley (in *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*), have sought to connect black workers (in this case, southern and largely rural black workers) with the radical stance of the American Communist Party. Some of the most important work in this area, however, has involved autobiographical or oral history methods. The historian Nell Irvin Painter's work with the black Communist Hosea Hudson produced an uneven but insightful memoir, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South*. Without doubt, the most masterful example of this genre is Theodore Rosengarten's oral history of a black Alabamian sharecropper, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*. In the more than twenty years since it was published, this book has transcended academic categories and become something of an American classic.

The Halpern and Horowitz volume, *Meatpackers*, follows creditably in this oral history tradition, even if it does not approach the power and complexity of Rosengarten's work. Instead of focusing on one individual, the book presents selections culled from a massive collection of oral interviews conducted by the authors with more than 125 former members of the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA). The interviewees are black, white, and Hispanic, male and female, with records of activism in the union as far back as the 1930s and as recent as the 1980s. The events they recount occurred in five cities, four of them in the Midwest, that were important centers in the meatpacking industry (Chicago; Kansas City; Omaha; Waterloo, Iowa; and Fort Worth, Texas).

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Meatpackers: An Oral History of Black Packinghouse Workers and Their Struggle for Racial and Economic Equality. By Rick Halpern and

black workers the worst jobs (before the union gained the strength to reverse such policies). Yet the underlying irony, recognized by many of those interviewed, is that those very same jobs provided a modicum of security and the possibility of intergenerational mobility for the relatively few black Americans who possessed them. Even more, the racist personnel policies that funneled black workers to the onerous and dangerous jobs on the "killing floor" actually made black workers indispensable to production, since without them the whole process would have stalled. A second theme, evident in comparing the accounts of the different locals, is the contrast between the initial organizing campaigns of fifty or more years ago and the more somber impact of plant closings and restructurings on workers' lives in recent decades.

But perhaps the most important themes that emerge from these interviews concern race—its political meaning within the union and its cultural meaning for African-American workers themselves. Starting in the 1930s, the union leadership was politically committed to the aggressive pursuit of racial equality within the industry and within the union. In contrast to other progressive unions, such as the United Auto Workers (UAW), the UPWA actively challenged employers to change their prejudicial policies. Yet, it was widely known within the union that many white members at best tolerated the stance of union leaders, both black and white.

The contrast between the Kansas City and Omaha experiences illuminates that dynamic. The Kansas City local, with a strong and vocal black leadership and rank and file, was able to pointedly address racial issues at work and within the union, and to draw the local into broader civil rights struggles as well. In Omaha, where blacks did not constitute a critical mass within the local, there was far less civil rights activity. In short, a strong presence of African-Americans as local leaders and members drew significant numbers of hesitant whites into a broader understanding of their role as unionists, citizens, and human beings, to the benefit of all. It is of more than passing interest to note that the UAW, which actively resisted bringing blacks into leadership positions until rather late and which viewed with suspicion, if not outright hostility, black efforts to organize caucuses within the union, was rarely able to implement on the shop floor the progressive positions the national leadership formally pronounced.

The interviews also reveal the cultural com-

plexity of these black unionists' lives. While a few were primarily motivated by political concerns, the majority came to their activism through a variety of traditions grounded in the African-American experience. From the church, the fraternal orders, the women's clubs, the NAACP, Malcolm X commemorative associations, and a host of other voluntary organizations—largely unknown to white Americans—that crosshatched black America, these activists drew their inspiration, honed their organizational skills, and formed their personal and public identities. These overlapping organizational commitments brought many black workers into the union movement once racial barriers to membership had been removed. Equally important, these same commitments grounded the consequent union identity in the life of the broader black community. That interplay is a tale of considerable significance that these interviews help clarify.

In these and other ways, *Meatpackers* is an interesting and useful book. For scholars looking to follow up on some of these themes, the authors have helped in two additional ways. First, they have included a finding guide to the entire collection of their oral interviews, housed at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin at Madison. Second, each author within the past year has published a monograph on the UPWA, the industry, and the experience of race. If these books explore in greater detail the themes suggested in this sample of the interviews, then our understanding of the history of these issues will be even more fully developed.

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