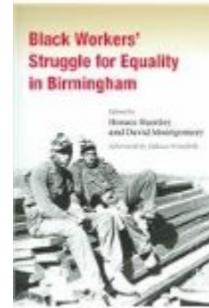


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Horace Huntley, David Montgomery, eds. *Black Workers' Struggle for Equality in Birmingham*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004. xi + 244 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02952-3.

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Union Activists and Civil Rights in Birmingham

Horace Huntley and David Montgomery have produced a volume that documents the efforts of labor activists and ordinary working women and men during the civil rights movement in Birmingham. Instead of trying to treat these stories as a single narrative, the volume consists of seventeen stories, based on oral history interviews and edited, annotated, and abridged by members of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute's staff.

An introductory essay by David Montgomery about union activism in the Birmingham area begins the book and places the interviews in a larger context. He argues that "unions were theaters of conflict and of mobilization against racial discrimination every bit as significant as were churches, schools, and public spaces" (p. 1). Labor unions pre-dated groups such as Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth's Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, and permitted African-American workers to form networks and groups that they could later use to support the movement. As Birmingham grew in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, black workers, drawn by higher wages, flocked to the city. While their chances to earn higher wages were greater than they found in rural areas, they did not find much else in the way of opportunities for blacks. Over time, the steel mills hired a greater percentage of white workers. The World War II-era surge of rural Southerners into Birmingham, searching for industrial jobs, allowed industries to exercise great selectivity in the people they hired. Some of the observations tend to affirm expectations. For example, in the steel mills and in other industries, black men

held the most dangerous jobs, and black women found their options limited to domestic service.

The presence and influence of labor unions made Birmingham different from other southern cities. Each individual whose oral history narrative appears in this volume came to the civil rights movement from their involvement in labor activities at work. Unionism appeared strong in Birmingham throughout the middle years of the twentieth century, though it would be helpful to know what percentage of the area's industries were unionized or how many of the area's workers were in unions at different times. Many unions were biracial, but not necessarily equal in the treatment of their members. Other unions were segregated, and those members tried to keep any black workers away from their "white" jobs. African-American workers had to struggle to gain company recognition of their unions, though New Deal legislation proved helpful in these efforts. Interestingly, some biracial unions aided blacks in registering to vote. The strength of labor activists became evident in politics in the late 1930s, when they mounted a successful challenge to Alabama's "Big Mules," the coalition of black belt landowners and industrialists who had dominated state politics. Perhaps the evidence of this interracial cooperation gave hope to the southern liberals who envisioned forming a great biracial liberal coalition in the years after World War II.[1] Labor's successes certainly did cause a reaction among the industrial leaders, landowners, and other conservatives in Alabama. These elements tried, with some success, to link labor with communism.

Using the interviews, Montgomery concludes that most union activists did not take a public role in civil rights protests, although most became active to some extent behind the scenes. More importantly, he argues that the movement's labor connections opened doors to national Democratic Party leaders, union officials, and others that would have otherwise remained closed to civil rights leaders. He also argues that many of the working men and women took the lessons they learned in the civil rights movement back into continuing struggles for equal rights within their unions.

The seventeen interviews vary in length from four to twenty-four pages. Thirteen of the interviewees are men, while four are women, and they represent varying occupations and experiences. Reuben Davis, a union activist turned politician, became a Jefferson County commission member. Most of the interviewees are African Americans, though it appears that two are white. Jerome "Buddy" Cooper was a white labor lawyer with extensive connections in the national labor movement. Eula McGill was a textile worker who was involved in organizing over 23,000 workers in North Alabama as part of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. She was fired from her job when pictures of her visiting Eleanor Roosevelt at the White House were published in Alabama newspapers.

Most of the narratives follow a similar format. They begin with information about their childhood and family life. Most of the interviewees were born in rural areas. Nearly all devote some attention to their education, describing the school system in Birmingham or wherever they were educated. They talk about the kind of employment they took, and some of the men talk about their military service. As has been argued in other works, the military experiences of black men in a segregated army led many of them to question living in a segregated society after the war.

The greater part of each interview describes the individual's involvement with the labor movement. Most describe situations where management was indifferent or hostile to them, white union members were looking out for themselves, and union rules discriminated against black workers. Several describe tactics used by manage-

ment and white workers to have black activists fired. Because they had jobs but feared losing their livelihood, many union activists took subordinate, though significant, roles in the civil rights campaign. An arrest at a protest would likely cost them their job. Many of the men worked in security, guarding churches and movement meetings. One interviewee, Elias Hendricks, noted that "the civil rights movement would have not been able to do a lot of the things that they were able to do had it not been for the labor movement, because they [unions] could get in some doors that black people just couldn't get in" (p. 66). Hendricks saw his role as negotiating rather than marching.

Summarizing the varied experiences of these interviewees is difficult, and except for the introduction, Huntley and Montgomery do not attempt it. Several themes emerge, however. The racism of Birmingham's police force appears in many of the narratives. Some specific examples of mistreatment or violence appear in more than one narrative, suggesting that they were common practices of the department. The resistance of management and of white workers to the changes brought about by the movement is another theme.

This volume will be of interest to anyone working in the history of the civil rights movement and in the history of labor in the South. Though scholars undertaking research in Birmingham, civil rights, or labor history would certainly want to consult the full transcripts of the interviews, these narratives would be a useful resource for students engaged in smaller research projects. Faculty members might mine the narratives for lecture examples or for classroom discussions. The publication of collections of oral histories such as these will undoubtedly help move the practice of oral history out of the archives and further into the mainstream of historical scholarship.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Home: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Norman V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), especially chap. 2.

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