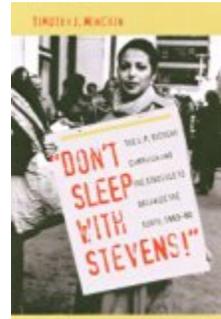


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Timothy L. Minchin. *"Don't Sleep With Stevens!": The J. P. Stevens Campaign and the Struggle to Organize the South, 1963-1980*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005. xvi + 239 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2810-1.

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Published on H-SAWH (July, 2008)



Weaving the Story of a Cultural Battle

Timothy L. Minchin has argued for some time that high wages and consumer-driven prosperity, not necessarily workers' submissiveness or a pervading paternalism, kept the South mostly non-unionized in the twentieth century. Arguably one of the most prolific labor historians in recent decades, Minchin has tackled many storied labor struggles—from race relations in the southern paper industry to the Textile Workers Union of America's (TWUA) failed attempts at southern organization in the 1940s and 1950s—and throughout has insisted that the question of unionization is perhaps always a cultural one.

Minchin's latest work, *"Don't Sleep with Stevens": The J. P. Stevens Campaign and the Struggle to Organize the South, 1963-1980*, is an excellent study of the methodical processes by which a reinvigorated TWUA launched a seventeen-year battle against the deceptive labor practices of textile conglomerate J. P. Stevens, which at the time operated in forty southern communities at over seventy mills. The TWUA fought tooth and nail in a drive to force "a company that was a symbol of anti-unionism to accept organized labor's presence in its southern mills" and simultaneously skirmished with southerners, and sometimes whole communities, who remained hostile to unionization (p. 70).

Don't Sleep with Stevens appears under the auspices of the University Press of Florida's New Perspectives on the History of the South series, but even the foreword by series editor John David Smith concedes that Minchin's contribution is more in the tradition of what many have

termed a "new southern labor history." Minchin's heavy use of oral history interviews easily hearkens back to *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (1987), a seminal work by Jacqueline Dowd Hall and others that explored the community and cultural traditions that shaped the lives of the Piedmont's textile workforce in the first decades of the twentieth century. The book initiated what many now call a "new labor history"—a reconceptualization of workers as cultural agents actively engaged in pursuits not pertaining to work. *Like a Family* also chronicled the TWUA's attempts at organization during the interwar period, a time when leaders thought that wartime prosperity would continue to resonate in a postwar generosity on the part of owners, and showed that it was northern companies' move southward in the 1930s and 1940s that dulled the impact of the 1934 general strike and hindered mainstream organization seemingly permanently.

Minchin's story is, then, an exploration of the social, political, economic, and cultural fallout from the move southward of companies like Stevens, companies that took full advantage of non-unionized (and, thus, relatively cheap) labor forces. For many southerners displaced by New Deal programs like the Agricultural Adjustment Act—which paid farmers to reduce acreage, thereby putting tenants out of work—and the industrialization of agriculture, wage work and town life did become financially beneficial. This became particularly true in the post-World War II era. The social and cultural climate of the South continued to foster race and class

divisions that plagued the mills themselves. In fact, as Minchin points out, life in the textile mills usually did one of two things. First, it might highlight divisions of race and class by way of overt discrimination in the placement of workers. For example, Stevens often employed black men only in work yards away from the main facility. Or second, mill management might propagate discrimination by simply not hiring certain groups of people. Black women remained largely absent from Stevens's workforces as well as from mills across the South.

Increasingly, unions like the TWUA began to realize that although some (mostly white) southerners benefited from a mild sense of prosperity through working for wages in mills and perhaps even standing in line for managerial promotions, companies like Stevens were certainly capitalizing on traditionally low southern wages as well as persistent Jim Crowism. Part of the union's campaign, then, was aptly called "America's Stake in the South"—a component that Minchin highlights more than once. "America's Stake in the South" implied that the South's labor problems became by default the nation's. The blatantly discriminatory practices of magnates like Stevens could easily represent the socioeconomic troubles of an entire country.

Oddly enough, Minchin fails to define what America's stake in the South really was—or is, for that matter. He chooses to explore the cultural connotations of the film *Norma Rae*—the popular 1979 film adaptation of a wronged Stevens's worker named Crystal Lee Sutton—only briefly. He describes the hype surrounding the movie, as well as the publicity tour and rally circuit that the TWUA heartily sent Sutton on, but never quite suggests to readers why such a woman's story might resonate with the entire country. However, the first and easiest answer (one that Minchin surprisingly never really explains) is that America at large was more than slightly obsessed with what the media and national culture deemed the South's many social and cultural plagues—poverty and racism chief among them. But sexism—and sexual harassment for that matter—also pervaded the working environment of the mills and certainly may have made the film resonate with women across the South and the entire country. Sadly, Minchin devotes little attention to the female mill experience here. Missing is an analysis of how grievances might have been gender-specific.

Minchin spends a large amount of text chronicling the involvement of northern organizations and activists in the TWUA campaign. The National Association for

the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Organization for Women (NOW), among many others, lent their support to events like the 1978 Justice for J. P. Stevens Workers Day—a national event held in more than 74 cities. Minchin, through his research and his prose, conveys the headiness that the cause evoked in activists across the country in the 1970s. What remains missing from Minchin's analysis, however, is a recognition and contextualization of the image of students, union leaders, and radical activists descending upon the South to work the campaign starting in the 1960s.

The obvious connotation here is that perhaps a civilized, unionized, and egalitarian North had swept down to save the culturally and economically challenged South—imposing order and union organization upon a group of workers ignorant of the advantages of unionization and activism. Of course, no scholar worth his or her salt would suppose that such a narrative was true. Minchin proclaims that he wants to contextualize the Stevens campaign within a broader historiography of 1970s activism—a brilliant and thus far only mildly tapped topic—but falls a little short.

The overriding push of the work, though, is stunning. Minchin's re-creation of the methodical processes by which the TWUA (later the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, after a 1976 merger) documented and railed against Stevens's abuses of managerial power paints a powerful narrative within which there is ultimately no victor. All across the South, and thus at many of the Stevens's mills, white workers continued to fear the loss of their jobs to black workers. The union's own internal struggle when it came to race—a "mixed civil rights record" at best, Minchin tell us—eventually turned to the full realization that black workers made up too much of the textile workforce (one-fourth by the 1980s) to be ignored (p. 70). Besides, many black employees had begun to craft their own fate by filing complaints through Title VII in the 1960s.

Minchin goes on to chronicle the National Labor Relations Board's findings of corruption and discrimination in Stevens's mills. But most compelling is Minchin's argument that the campaign was thwarted, in the end, by Stevens's willingness to raise wages and offer incentives to employees who would commit to remaining non-unionized. In an ironic twist, then, many Stevens's employees ended up gaining by not joining the union's efforts.

An October 1980 settlement between Stevens and the ACTWU allowed for bargaining rights at certain sites

where the union had won elections or achieved a majority. Then, in 1983, Stevens conceded one million dollars in back pay to wronged employees. Minchin insists that the campaign became dulled in the wake of these talks, as, once again, southern workers and communities found themselves with seemingly little “need” for a union. As a “new” labor historian, Minchin’s overarching theme is that the workers that the textile union attempted to organize saw their work not only in logistical terms but also culturally. All of the most deeply-seated social and cultural ideas of race and class in the South boiled to the surface during the seventeen-year battle. Minchin brings his conclusion nearly up to the present day, briefly mentioning the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that led to job losses in industries like textiles, in an effort to convey the potential dangers of anti-union sentiment in a globalizing South (and nation). Given the timeliness of the NAFTA controversy and its role in the recent race for a Democratic presidential nominee, as well as the always-present debate over the role of unions in American labor relations, any scholar would be wise to read Minchin’s newest work.

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Citation: Lesley-Anne Reed. Review of Minchin, Timothy L., *“Don’t Sleep With Stevens!”: The J. P. Stevens Campaign and the Struggle to Organize the South, 1963-1980*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. July, 2008.

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