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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daniel Letwin. *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xii + 289 pp. $27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4678-0; $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2377-4.

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Published on H-SHGAPE (December, 1998)

Race and Class in the Alabama Coal Fields

Daniel Letwin's new book, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism*, joins a growing list of recent works which address in new and sophisticated ways the issues of race and class consciousness in American labor history.[1] Letwin tackles a venerable subject in American labor history: mining. The debates surrounding race and the United Mine Workers were stimulated by Herbert Gutman's noted 1968 essay. Gutman argued that the United Mine Workers Union was a beacon of hope in the rough sea of racism that was America in the Gilded Age. The union developed an interracial philosophy that privileged class consciousness over race consciousness. The core of his argument concerned the career of one black UMW official, Richard Davis.[2]

Twenty years after Gutman's essay first appeared, and three years after his death, Herbert Hill wrote a scathing rejoinder. Claiming that Gutman had romanticized the UMW, Hill argued that it was fundamentally racist, accepting black members but doing little for them.[3]

Letwin's book is a full and careful study of this significant and contested subject. Rather than simply re-evaluating the source which both Gutman and Hill relied upon, Letwin examined the lives, communities, and culture of black and white miners in the Southern fields. As a result, Letwin rejects the views of both Gutman and Hill, and instead offers a third way to view the complex relationship between race and class in Gilded Age and Progressive Era America.

The central question for Letwin is "what was the degree of cooperation and mutual respect between black and white miners" (p. 3)? He sees three interrelated themes in the experiences of Alabama miners: an awareness that racial division worked against miners of both races in dealing with mine operators; black and white miners shared a common work culture and class identity; and lastly, the unions and community organizations held onto certain key aspects of white supremacy as a means to inoculate themselves against the attacks of white supremists.

The book can be neatly divided into three parts
eras, each with its own unique focus: Gilded Age, Progressive Era, and World War I. Politics played an important part for miners in the Gilded Age. Here we are treated to a discussion of the history of greenbackism, populism, the Knights of Labor, and the National Labor Union in the coal camps of Alabama. In this section of the book, Letwin connects politics and work culture much like Leon Fink did in his work on the Knights. All of these political
labor groups shared one key factor: they "kept alive an ethos of labor mutuality that tested the dual traditions of employer paternalism and white supremacy" (p. 67). Like many other unions, the Knights died because it failed to stay connected to the needs of rank-and-file workers. It became too much of a political party and functioned less and less as a union.

With the hardening of the Jim Crow system of segregation after 1900, politics would provide less and less of a solution. Prudently, the newly-formed UMW focused almost entirely on work-related solutions. In an effort to hold together their fragile union, mine union officials resisted efforts to use race against them by denying that they sought social equality for blacks. Letwin argues that the UMW used white supremacy as a way to deflect criticism of the unions interracialism. Thus, both Hill and Gutman were correct: the union was both racist and supported interracialism. The UMW-led strikes in 1903 and again in 1908 demonstrate two things. One was the strength of the operators to break the union. Even more significant, miners held onto their interracial strategies even at the expense of losing the strike. Miners were somehow different. Unlike other white workers, white miners did not abandon their black brothers for higher

wages. Miners did not accept a two-tier, racially divided work force.

World War I brought yet another change. Two significant groups outside of the workplace entered into the miners' world: middle-class black "up-lifters" and the federal government. On the role of government intervention, Letwin's work reinforces the work of Joseph McCartin, focusing on how government intervention both limited and empowered workers during the war. On the role of the black middle-class, Letwin might have over reached. He presents a static, unified black middle class which followed the teaching of Booker T. Washington and therefore opposed unions and supported the paternalism of the companies. Recent work on the role of black middle-class reformers in the Progressive Era tells a much more complicated story. It is possible that all of Birmingham's black middle class spoke with one unified voice, but it is unlikely.[4]

The core argument is simply that interracialism survived. It certainly did not triumph, but neither did it fully die. And that is remarkable, considering the array of powerful forces against it in the era of Jim Crow. Miners' interracialism was "uneven" (p. 94). Its unevenness, a subject that Letwin exhausts with a mountain of evidence, lays to rest the Gutman-Hill debate. The UMW held neither the racial high or low ground, but positioned itself between the two polls, never reaching either extreme. Letwin develops the fitting metaphor of "an ongoing project" (p. 130) to understand the "collaboration between the races" (p. 134). The miners' interracialism was always in the state of becoming.

But considering the forces against interracialism, one must ask how it survived as long as it did. The answer, according to Letwin, is that a "common class experience among black and white miners provided the impetus to interracialism" (p. 192). Letwin argues that workers could share a similar class experience while at the same time holding divergent racial outlooks.

Each section of this book presents remarkable detail. In this regard, Letwin has certainly followed Gutmans style in telling little stories, the small details that make social history come alive. The result is a well-told, complex history that deserves a wide reading.

Notes

[1]. The list is quite large and growing. See Roger Horowitz, *"Negro and White, Unite and Fight": A Social History of Industrial Unionism in Meatpacking, 1930-1990* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); and Judith Stein, *Running Steel, Running American: Race, Economic Policy, and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[2]. Herbert G. Gutman, "The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America, the Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis and Something of Their Meaning: 1890-1900," in *The Negro and the American Labor Movement*, edited by Julius Jacobson (New York: Anchor Books, 1968), 49-127.

[3]. Herbert Hill, "Myth-Making as Labor History: Herbert Gutman and the United Mine Workers of America," *Politics, Culture and Society* 2:2 (Winter 1988), 132-200.

[4]. On labor and World War I see Joseph McCartin, *Labor's Great War: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy and the Origins of Modern American Labor Relations, 1912-1921* (Chapel Hill: University of north Carolina Press, 1997). On the role of black middle-class professionals during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see the work of Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996) and Elizabeth Lasch-Quinn, Black Neighbors: Race and the Limits of Reform in the American Settlement House Movement, 1890-1945_ (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

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Citation: Richard A. Greenwald. Review of Letwin, Daniel, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921.* H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. December, 1998.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2541

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