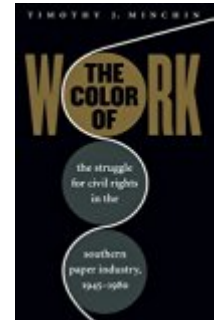


Timothy J. Minchin. *The Color of Work: The Struggle for Civil Rights in the Southern Paper Industry, 1945-1980.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. xi + 277 pp. \$55.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8078-2618-8.



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Black Protest, Federal Power, and the Desegregation of the Southern Workplace

Paper mills are a common sight--and smell--to all who have spent much time traversing the South's coastal plain. From West Point, Virginia, to Port St. Joe, Florida, to Bogalusa, Louisiana, these mills encircle the South in a nearly continuous belt, providing the economic backbone of many rural counties. Throughout its history, the southern paper industry has been quite unique among the region's industrial enterprises. Since the 1920s, the southern paper industry has attracted both white and black workers to do dirty, dangerous work in relatively isolated mills with the promise of high wages and relative friendliness to organized labor. For many in the coastal South, paper mill work provides economic opportunity, however uneven.

Despite its importance to the rural South's economy in the twentieth century, few historians of southern industrial development have taken notice of the region's paper industry. None have sought to explore the important ways that race shaped the world of the paper mill or how African

American workers fought to break the job segregation that marked the industry. It is this historiographical void that Timothy J. Minchin attempts to fill with *The Color of Work*, a book which will be of interest not only to students of southern labor and industrial history, but also those of the African American freedom struggle.

Professor Minchin's monograph is a tightly-focused study of discrimination in the southern paper industry since World War II. He begins the study by examining how black paper workers came to be ensnared in the least desirable and lowest paying jobs in the industry in the years before 1960. "Prior to the 1960s," Minchin explains, "most black workers were confined to working at the first stage of the primary manufacturing process--in the woodyard," (p. 12). Higher paying, more desirable jobs on the paper machines were reserved entirely for white workers. Work in paper mills, then, was entirely racialized, or, as one worker remembered, "They had white jobs and black jobs," (p. 33).

While job segregation had its roots in the South's cultural practices, it was not until the

years after World War II that the dividing line completely hardened. Black workers had been able to fill a number of skilled jobs during the war, Minchin explains, but "[a]fter the war ended, both white workers and management were anxious to regain control of these jobs and to ensure that blacks did not aspire to them again" (p. 29). To regain white control of job assignments, union leaders and mill managers each enacted controls that would enforce a color line in the mills. Paper companies made it policy to follow the racial mores of the locality.

Union leaders, meanwhile, agreed in 1951 to place all black employees into one union, the International Brotherhood of Pulp, Sulphite, and Paper Mill Workers (IBPSPMW), with segregated locals, excluding them from higher paying jobs that fell under the control of the all white United Papermakers and Paperworkers (UPP). Separate lines of job progression then maintained occupational segregation and blocked black workers from promotion out of the wood yard.

Black workers resisted the hardening of the lines of occupational segregation, often working through their union locals. Again and again workers sought redress through the union grievance process. Black union locals became the centers of black protest not only in the mills, but also in many of the towns dominated by the paper mills. In Bogalusa, Louisiana, for example, where the Crown-Zellerbach plant dominated the local economy, Local 189A provided the meeting place and material support to the Bogalusa Voters' League (BVL), a local civil rights organization. The leaders of black locals throughout the South engaged themselves in fighting for desegregation in theaters and restaurants as much as in the mills.

Paper mills, however, proved resistant to change. Despite their tireless efforts, black workers and their union leaders made no progress in desegregating paper work before 1964. Comparative weakness in representation made integration of the mills impossible, as black leaders found

themselves outvoted or simply ignored by white union leaders when they pressed for desegregation. At the same time, mill managers, unwilling to upset white workers, provided no help in meeting black demands for equal opportunity. "Segregated unionism did give African American workers a voice to protest against discrimination," Minchin argues, "but black locals lacked the power to bring about lasting changes in job assignments," (p. 99).

Additionally, many black workers feared bucking the system. The relatively high wages of paper work made them reluctant to become too outspoken lest they be terminated or have their hours reduced. "I needed work and I had a family," was a common refrain heard in the oral testimony of workers who endured the frustration and humiliation of the workplace (p. 42). White workers compounded this fear through outright intimidation and harassment. Despite occupational segregation, whites and blacks often worked in close proximity and "many whites were especially anxious to defend the skilled or 'white' part of any job," (p. 42). As Minchin makes clear, "companies and unions were very successful at maintaining the system of complete job segregation" (p. 48).

In the late 1960s and 1970s, however, their defense of workplace segregation began to crumble, as the 1964 Civil Rights Act transformed the South's paper mills. According to Minchin, this landmark legislation is the watershed event in the desegregation of the southern paper industry. The act's results were manifold. In the wake of its passage, many black workers jumped at the opportunity to integrate the paper mills' separate--and patently unequal--facilities (locker rooms, cafeterias, etc.). Strangely, most white workers did not violently oppose this integration; instead most simply refused to use the facilities any longer. At the same time, many black workers began to press for equal job and promotional opportunities.

The law also forced the federal government to ensure that all of its suppliers complied with Title VII of the act, which prohibited employment discrimination. Since most paper mills held government contracts, federal agencies like the Office of Federal Contract Compliance (OFCC) and the Defense Supply Agency (DSA) were obligated to investigate complaints of discrimination lodged by black paper workers. The government's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, created to enforce compliance of the act, also provided a conduit through which black workers could lodge complaints against employers and negotiate compliance.

More important than direct government oversight, however, was the legal standing the law gave black employees who experienced occupational segregation. Black workers who had found only frustration in dealing with employers and white union leaders could, after 1964, file suit in federal court to force compliance, which they did in waves. "In the 1960s and 1970s," Minchin declares, "virtually every southern paper mill was engaged in a class action racial discrimination lawsuit brought under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act" (p. 3). These lawsuits forced the mills to take steps to integrate. In 1968, in response to a class action lawsuit, International Paper agreed to a consent decree known as the Jackson Memorandum--named for the city where it was hammered out--that provided the process for desegregating the mills. Since International Paper was the largest employer in the South, Minchin explains, the memorandum became the model for desegregation in most of the region's mills following 1968.

Despite the importance of the 1968 consent decree as a model, its promise often remained unfulfilled into the 1970s. "In the decade after 1968," affirms Minchin, "ineffective implementation ensured that the Jackson Memorandum, like other agreements modeled upon it, was only partially successful in improving the status of black paper workers" (p. 139). Under the provisions of the

memorandum, African American workers were to be offered opportunities for progression, but they often found themselves locked out of better jobs. In many instances, mill managers and union leaders duped black employees into waiving their right to apply for transfers. In other cases, white workers simply refused to train African Americans placed into formerly "white" positions. Not only that, but outright harassment of black workers by whites continued throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s.

Minchin's evidence offers compelling testimony of the recalcitrance of white workers in the South to accept integration of the workplace. In the end, it is clear that the struggle over civil rights in the southern paper industry was a hard fought battle that is not entirely completed.

Minchin's book is important for a number of reasons. First, it brings a different insight to the complex history of inter-racial unionism in the South. While some, like Michael Honey, have argued that in the South's atmosphere of repression, "struggles for civil rights, civil liberties, and labor rights became inextricably intertwined," Minchin shows that southern workers did not always see the linkage between civil rights and workers' rights.[1] In the case of the paper industry--which was extraordinarily friendly to unions in Minchin's telling--white workers overwhelmingly supported unionism, but only on a segregated basis. While a linkage clearly existed between black unionism and civil rights work, white unions proved to be quite reactionary in fighting integration. As Minchin tentatively demonstrates, these unionized white workers were some of the strongest supporters of George Wallace in 1968, demonstrating a willingness to side with reactionary conservatism over economic interest.

In addition, Minchin's work is an important reminder that the generally accepted chronology and scope of the Civil Rights Movement needs to be questioned. In the general narrative of American history, the Civil Rights Movement reached a

crescendo with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and quickly thereafter devolved into a factionalized fiasco. Minchin reminds us that for many, the 1964 Civil Rights Act was only the beginning of a new struggle for freedom largely fought out in the courts. In doing this, he also demonstrates that civil rights in the eyes of black paper workers meant much more than just integrated lunch counters; they meant equal opportunity and an end to economic discrimination.

Minchin put a great deal of work into creating this important book. Drawing on often under-used court proceedings from the numerous federal lawsuits that came out of the Civil Rights Act, he was able to cull a great deal of information about the segregation of southern paper mills. These records provide excellent insight into not only the specific case being heard but also into the struggle for equal rights in the mills. In addition, Minchin draws on a number of interviews done with former workers--white and black--as well as union leaders and union managers. Other government sources and national periodicals also form an important part of his research base.

If there are problems with *The Color of Work*, they arise because of the book's format. By attempting to explore a specific theme in each chapter, the author is rarely able to give depth to a specific time period or region. Indeed, it is often difficult to get a sense of the book's chronology, and only a few locations leave any distinct impression on the reader. Chapter 9, a study of the St. Joe Paper Company drawn from Minchin's award-winning *Florida Historical Quarterly* article, solves these problems while demonstrating their presence in the rest of the book.[2] This chapter, by far the most tightly written, explores all of the major themes of the book in one location, giving the reader both a sense of chronology and location. Despite these limitations, however, Minchin makes an important contribution to our understanding of southern labor and civil rights.

Notes

[1]. Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 8.

[2]. Timothy J. Minchin, "'There Were Two Jobs in St. Joe Paper Company, White Job and Black Job': The Struggle for Civil Rights in a North Florida Paper Mill Community, 1938-1990," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (Winter 2000): 331-59.

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