

Heather Ann Thompson. *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001. viii + 295 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-3520-1.



Reviewed by Wilbur C. Rich

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The Multiple Claims on Detroit

The squabble over who owns Detroit started with the turn of the twentieth century when Henry Ford advertised in Southern newspapers for black workers to come north to work in his assembly plants. At that time, Ford was the prince of the city. Few people contested his ownership claims. His challenge came when other automobile makers arrived to make cars in Detroit. The social and economic challenge to factory empires was the labor movement. Asserting the welfare of the plant workers as its mandate, the United Automobile Workers (UAW) evolved into a different type of realm. The challenge to this domain came from the black workers. This is where Heather Thompson's fascinating chronicling of events comes in. Using James Johnson, a black automobile worker at the Chrysler Plant, she weaves his life into why black workers felt unrepresented or unprotected by their union. Thompson follows James Johnson's story from Starkville, Mississippi to Detroit as an allegory for the plight of black workers. Johnson, who killed three white workers, used conditions at the plant and racial dis-

crimination as part of his defense in his 1971 trial. Although he was declared criminally insane, the story does not stop there, as his doctors attributed false statements to him. Johnson's troubles exemplified the social transformation of southern black peasants into northern proletarians.

Thompson's history of the labor movement from 1945 to 1985 analyzes the grievances of black workers and their advocacy organization, Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), and its counterparts at other plants. Although DRUM has been written about before, Thompson's book provides more depth. This was an era of Marxist analogies, grassroots organizing, and Black Nationalist rhetoric. Thompson gleaned the archives and read newspaper accounts, including those in the *South End* (Wayne State University's student newspaper), of the evolution of DRUM, the tactics of its leaders, and the legal battles they fought. Her discussion of the racial and other internal conflicts within the UAW is first-rate.

Thompson's book is labor history told from the perspective of the assembly floor workers. It explains how racial discrimination can lead to vi-

olence. Given the worst job on the floor, the foreman and management grew. When they complained, no one listen and this led to many of them taking matters into their own hands. Whites reacted by framing incidents as criminality. This is why they supported the special unit of the police department called STRESS. Blacks saw the STRESS unit as a menace to black civil liberties, and it became a major issue in the 1973 election in which the city elected its first black mayor, Coleman Young.

Finally, Thompson does an excellent job of linking politics to the transformation of the labor movement. She detailed the impact of what she calls the "civic liberalism" of Mayor Jerome Cavanagh and Coleman Young on the militant labor activists. This is a fascinating book that makes a significant contribution to the literature. For scholars of Detroit history, it is a must read. I also recommend it to social scientists interested in the nexus between Detroit politics and the labor movement.

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