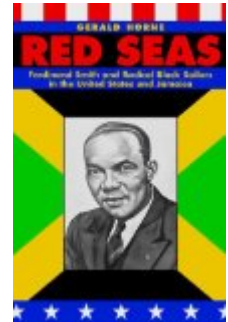


Gerald Horne. *Red Seas: Ferdinand Smith and Radical Black Sailors in the United States and Jamaica.* New York: New York University Press, 2005. xv + 359 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-3668-5.



Reviewed by Stephen Schwartz

Published on H-HOAC (January, 2008)

The biography of Ferdinand Smith (1893-1961), a Jamaican-born adherent of the American Communist Party and officer of the National Maritime Union (NMU), as written by Gerald Horne of the University of Houston, may be welcomed by historians who share Horne's uncritical view of the Communist Party (CP) and its labor and racial advocacy in the 1930s. But, it is replete with flaws that are not limited to the obvious ones.

Previously largely unknown in the seafaring labor movement, Smith emerged during an organizing campaign in favor of the CP-dominated NMU, which was founded in 1937. He never held local positions, but functioned as vice president and national secretary of the organization until he was removed in 1948. A Caribbean black, he was a prominent symbol of CP backing for African American equality. He was finally deported from the United States in 1952.

Horne has effectively ignored, with the exception of minor and distorted references, the intra-labor combat that produced the NMU--the water-front battle of ideological factions, pitting syndi-

calists against CP supporters, during the middle and late 1930s. In Horne's view, the NMU sprang full blown from the head of the CP. Without elucidation, he baldly declares that "the idea for the NMU itself came from the party" (p. 36). There may be a virtue in admitting the historical fact of Communist domination in the union, which CP supporters long denied, but which rank-and-file seamen always knew and admitted. Yet, that is small comfort when one considers the relevant themes absent from this text, as well as its plentitude of false claims. Horne has also passed over lightly, or elided discussion of, such key issues in American Communist and maritime labor history as the conduct of the Soviet Union in the Spanish civil war of 1936-39, the Stalin-Hitler pact, and the 1948 break between Joseph Stalin and Josip Broz Tito. All these episodes profoundly affected American seamen. The syndicalist trend had kept unionism alive among sailors during the 1920s, after the once-powerful International Seamen's Union (ISU) had been broken. Both syndicalism and the ISU were reborn, although with undeniable internal contradictions, in the climactic 1934 West Coast maritime and general strike. But the

CP contingent was younger and more disciplined, with financial and publicity advantages including numerous periodicals, along with members and sympathizers among the longshoremen and outside the shipping industry available for mobilization on the waterfront. In addition, the syndicalist ideology was *sui generis*, especially in its North American, Pacific, and British forms, as mainly represented by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), while the CP program, at least on papers, was impressive in its world-historical coherence.

The conflict between these alternatives in maritime labor was unique on the U.S. scene during the 1930s, and the failure of the CP faction among seamen on the U.S. Pacific Coast led directly to the establishment of the NMU as a CP-dominated institution on the Atlantic. Gulf of Mexico shipping was a battleground between them. While fragments of this history appear from time to time on the surface of Horne's book, they are never granted an appropriate analysis or placed in a coherent context.

Thus, Horne writes, "In Harlem on a single day in the spring of 1933 the Unemployed Council fought seventeen evictions, ... a major Scottsboro meeting was held," a branch of a CP "dual union" affiliated with the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL) was formed, and three hundred people demonstrated at a relief agency. He then declares that "it was in this context that the NMU was founded with critical support from Negro sailors--and Ferdinand Smith" (pp. 25-26). But any historian with the slightest understanding of American labor in the 1930s should recognize that the social environment of 1933 and that visible when the NMU was created in 1937 were markedly different.

Further, many seamen, both syndicalist and Communist, traveled to Spain to fight--but Horne grants them minimal recognition. The Stalin-Hitler alliance (which Horne barely acknowledges) directly affected the very lives of seamen

as German submarines attempted to blockade U.S. assistance to the British before American entry into the Second World War. And, a large South Slavic (Slovene, Croatian, and Montenegrin) representation in the American seagoing professions gave the Tito break a special impact in the NMU.

But Horne, in his enthusiasm for Smith and the CP, has little time for such external matters. Race, rather than class solidarity or trade union militancy, is his overriding concern. Even in this realm, however, he is myopic: his survey omits the controversy between the CP and African American civil rights adherents, such as A. Philip Randolph, in the years preceding and during the Second World War. In a truly amazing statement, perhaps to mitigate the troubling record of the CP at that time, Horne declares that "sympathy for Japan among black Americans represented a clear and present danger to the war effort" (p. 84). While black disaffection with American race policies indeed represented a challenge for the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, I know of no serious historian who has previously described the problem in such extreme terms.

In the paragraph that follows, Horne asserts that the NMU, the then International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), and the West Coast Marine Cooks and Stewards (MCS) "were among the few unions that protested to the U.S. government against the internment of the Japanese Americans" (p. 84). Horne sources this invention to a 1983 recollection by CP and NMU official Joe Stack, illustrating the risks of utilizing oral history--especially when recorded from partisan individuals--to support political claims. In reality, the bad record of the CP and the unions under its control, regarding wartime relocation of ethnic Japanese, has been exposed by the American party's own ethnic Japanese members. In a similar example of propaganda disguised as history and supported by delayed recall, Horne had previously made the heretofore unstated charge that racist attitudes among Gulf seamen were "compounded

by an 'atmosphere of anarchy ... because of the role of the Wobblies'" (IWW members). The source of this slur is also a 1983 oral history excerpt, this time from "Communist sailor Paul Jarvis" (p. 65).

One is compelled in reading this book to contend mainly with Horne's prejudices and views of prejudice, which may be legitimate, given that Horne avers that this work "is about Ferdinand Smith, but ... is also a book about Jamaica, the National Maritime Union (and sailors more broadly) and the Communist Party" (p. xii). But what may be said, based on this volume, about Smith? In the CP tradition, he is lionized as an NMU founding vice president and symbol of progressive racial attitudes in the party's labor milieu. The pathos of this account is that Smith had no significant history as a union militant before his rapid rise in the NMU. From the creation of the union onward, he was used by the CP as a token. Smith was described as a "figurehead" in a 1982 oral history interview with Hoyt Haddock, a former CP stalwart in the NMU (p. 303, note 9). But Haddock's testimony, which Horne consigns to a footnote, neither legitimates dependence on commentaries based on memories recorded long after the fact nor is necessary to understand the role of Smith, which is undeniably obvious. Horne admits it when he states that to African American merchant mariners "entrusting their fate to the white leadership of ... the NMU, might not be wise; this is why Smith's presence in the leadership was so crucial" (p. 31).

Horne dates Smith's first significant maritime union activity to 1936, two years after the "revolution" of 1934. The author infers with apparently deliberate vagueness that Smith had joined the CP in the 1920s, but does not detail the circumstances of his adhesion, which Smith denied in deportation hearings two decades later. Indeed, there is so little reliable historiography in this book, and so much sloganizing, that, to one who knows the established history of the worldwide maritime la-

bor movement, the volume appears more like a counterfactual novel than a scholarly work. Chronology and geographical consistency are inaccurate, or, better, nonexistent. Incidents that took place in Texas are not only misrepresented, but inexplicably cited to explain events on the Atlantic Coast. The only pretext for this jumble seems to be that it is easier to describe racism in a southern state. But, as if this arbitrary method of assembly were not enough, according to Horne, Smith was, during the late 1930s, "the most powerful Negro trade unionist in the country," a surprising claim to say the least, considering the prestige of Randolph (p. 28).

But that is not enough for the ingenious Horne, who proclaims Smith, at the launch of the NMU, as "now among the most powerful men in the nation" (p. 35). This exalted position is based on the allegation that the NMU in 1937 had "a firm grip on imports and exports, oil tankers, and ... was essential to the lifeblood of the nation" (p. 35). In reality, the NMU at its origins was a minority in the labor movement, had no "grip" on shipping, and was stymied, along with the other maritime organizations, on the tankers, which have remained a redoubt of subservience to the shipowners to the present. In this, as in so many other references, Horne betrays, along with CP triumphalism, an almost-total ignorance of the U.S. maritime industry.

Unfortunately for both Smith and Horne, the latter is compelled to address a controversy that began almost as soon as the NMU was set up and Smith installed as a top official. Smith, it turned out, had failed to join the 1934 strike, while employed as a chief steward (food service manager) on an intercoastal vessel. In 1937 and for many years to come, one's record in 1934 was an irreplaceable credential for maritime militants. Smith and the CP offered a convoluted explanation for Smith's status as a strikebreaker at the critical hour: Communist maritime officials had supposedly told the crew to wait until the ship reached

the West Coast before walking off. But when it reached the Pacific, the strike was "weakest" in the first port it made, San Pedro, and joining the work stoppage "would not have aided the strikers' cause" (p. 40). In the real world of labor organization, a weak point in a strike is a place where action should be focused, but in the tortured dialectic of the CP, it was a pretext to justify the strike-breaking of an individual the party had boosted to power.

In his defense, Smith claimed to have sailed from Seattle, where the 1934 strike was outstandingly successful, but Horne confusingly intimates that Smith, although only a steward aboard the vessel, was responsible for it ending up in San Francisco where the captain ordered it to remain at anchor in the bay, so the sailors could not join the walkout. Smith claimed he had organized the stewards' department aboard the ship for a Communist network, the Marine Workers' Industrial Union (MWIU), but could produce no membership papers proving such an affiliation. He contradicted himself by truthfully stating that the MWIU had almost no support among sailors, but also claimed that the CP "union" was responsible for crucial organizing and strike relief in 1934. Here, too, the CP faction resorted to falsification in supporting Smith, by asserting that all MWIU documentation had been destroyed to evade vigilantes as well as legal repression. (MWIU records kept by the CP in New York would not, however, have been accessible to destruction by outsiders.)

After much labored argument, the union's trial committee found against Smith, but the committee was overruled, and Smith was cleared of the charge of strikebreaking. From 1938 until the collapse of Communist influence in the NMU, in the aftermath of the Second World War, Horne's chronicle presents an approving recitation of CP blandishments and entreaties, as, to paraphrase the Trotskyist James P. Cannon, NMU members sailed ships and the CP sailed the sailors. Horne, like the CP leadership at the time, treats any oppo-

sition to CP domination within the union as a conspiracy by the employers, gangsters, labor spies, and Trotskyists. He offers predictable material on the ownership of shipping lines but demonstrates little or no competence regarding the grievances or even the working habits and technology of the seafarer.

Horne's undisciplined and arbitrary narrative line also features anachronisms, as when he describes the NMU of 1940 as "affirmative action-conscious" (p. 59). To the author of this book, historical continuity and expertise are easily subordinated to other concerns; after its opening chapters and their incoherent presentation of maritime labor history, the book turns mainly to race. Much of the middle text is a disorganized agglomeration of remarks about race-related issues and episodes, with occasional references to gender, sexuality, and an inchoate category of "fascists."

In 1944, Smith's lack of U.S. citizenship was exposed to the public. Carrying a British passport, Smith resigned his NMU vice presidency the next year and shipped out, then came back to the United States as a legal immigrant. He was returned to power as national secretary of the union through questionable machinations, but the end of a career marked by considerable rhetoric, bureaucratic frenzies, open dishonesty, and little real achievement for seafarers was in sight. Horne's inventory of boasts and trivia, as well as his own evasions and ambiguities, already unrewarding, become simply tedious as he enters the phase of Smith's martyrdom to anti-Communism.

The simplification of the postwar fate of the Communist-led American trade unions has become too familiar. A book that began in vagueness, and then displayed confusion, turns to empty clichés. Horne's account of the collapse of CP authority in the NMU, culminating in the union's 1947 convention, is disjointed and hackneyed, when not bizarre. Among other unexpected items, Horne states without supporting evidence that leading CP members were "government agents"

and that opposition by union rank-and-file members ruined the CPers' health (p. 186). In this panorama, only one, typical charge requires an answer: the false accusation that the Sailors' Union of the Pacific (SUP) barred Asians from membership. In reality, the SUP had been much more active than any CP union in defending its ethnic Japanese members against wartime relocation.

Smith was removed from office and expelled from the NMU in 1948 for misuse of union funds, along with two prominent CP figures, Paul Palazzi and Howard McKenzie. Four years later, in 1952, not in 1951 as stated by Horne, he was finally deported from the United States to his native Jamaica. The remainder of this volume revisits, in Horne's meandering manner, assorted details of the period, then turns to race and politics in the Caribbean. There, its relevance to American Communist and labor history ends.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-hoac>

Citation: Stephen Schwartz. Review of Horne, Gerald. *Red Seas: Ferdinand Smith and Radical Black Sailors in the United States and Jamaica*. H-HOAC, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14068>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.