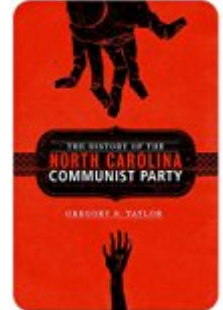


Gregory S. Taylor. *The History of the North Carolina Communist Party.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009. 258 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57003-802-0.



Reviewed by Mary E. Triage

Published on H-Southern-Industry (October, 2009)

Commissioned by Tom Downey (Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Princeton University)

The History of the North Carolina Party by Gregory S. Taylor offers a window into the efforts of the North Carolina Communist Party (NCCP) and further dispels stereotypes that early twentieth-century Communists were dangerous radicals bent on destroying everything American. Rather, Taylor illustrates, they were “a small group of dedicated activists who sought to undermine the plutocratic dominance and expand the benefits of the state’s progressivism” (pp. 2-3). The book begins with the Communist Party’s initial foray into the state in 1928 and continues through its disappointing demise by the early 1960s. Taylor’s purpose is to offer the “first in-depth assessment of the North Carolina Communist Party, its successes, its failures, and its impact on the state and nation.” He explains that members “did not see themselves as enemies of the nation but rather as heroic fighters defending true American values by standing against perceived fascist threats to freedom, liberty, and the American way of life” (p. 5). Taylor concludes the book with an assessment of

the efforts of NCCP activists as “laudable,” if not heroic (p. 215).

Taylor’s study is significant for its detailed chronology of the Communist Party’s efforts in North Carolina, particularly the organization’s involvement in the 1929 strike in Gastonia and its civil rights and student activism. Taylor covers the Gastonia strike in greater depth than previous studies by accessing Comintern files recently made available to the public. Relying on reports written by African American party organizers John H. Owens and Otto Hall, Taylor sheds light on the challenges of organizing black workers during the Gastonia strike. In his short visit to Gastonia, Owens met with black mill workers to discover why they were not involved in the strike. He found that since white workers had not included blacks in the union, they “feared striking would be equivalent to quitting” (p. 29). Black workers also informed Owens that after three of them had initially joined the union, “mill security forced them back to work at gunpoint” (p. 29). Taylor illustrates the similarly frustrating experi-

ences of Hall by drawing on the organizer's report of his experiences: "The attitude of these cracker strikers toward the Negro has not been changed a bit. Our comrades down here have retreated before them on the Negro question and have let them have their way" (p. 34). According to Hall, African American workers' resistance to the strike was understandable and indicated a failure on the part of party organizers.

Taylor's coverage of the challenges faced by the NCCP as it took up civil rights activism reminds readers of the Communist Party's place at the forefront of this issue. Taylor details the NCCP's anti-lynching campaigns, demonstrations, and an anti-lynching conference held in October 1930. At a September 1930 demonstration, three thousand gathered to hear Communist Party candidates speak about their commitment to end lynching. Drawing on Comintern files, Taylor provides a cursory discussion of party pamphlets, flyers, and a small booklet, "Down with Lynch Law" distributed to those gathered. Also insightful is Taylor's reliance on the lesser-studied Communist Party publication *Southern Worker* as he documents the NCCP's involvement in the case of the Scottsboro boys. Racism remained a stubborn obstacle for the NCCP and as Taylor's research illustrates, often stood in the way of organizing workers for tangible gains.

Taylor extends our knowledge of student radicalism with his examination of Communist Party activism at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, in particular the efforts of individuals such as Junius Scales and Hans Freistadt. Taylor draws on insightful documents such as the *Communist Student Bulletin*, found in the Junius Scales Papers at UNC, and the North Carolina Labor Youth League's publication *Fightin' Words*, located in the North Carolina Collection at UNC. Remarkable among the activists' efforts were those to achieve integration at UNC as early as 1949. Taylor asserts that the NCCP was a "noted, vocal, and early advocate of integration," and the Labor

Youth League and its publications likewise worked to promote this goal (p. 195). The party's paper, *Fighter for Peace*, also directed criticism at Jim Crow and, as the Korean War heated up, "attacked militarism on campus" (p. 197). Of the paper, Taylor writes, these "masterpieces of Communist propaganda brilliantly used issues dear to the hearts of the mostly white student body and wove those issues in with concerns dear to the Communist Party" (p. 197). Taylor's account of the NCCP's efforts at UNC also highlights the injustice and red-baiting faced by faculty and students alike who spoke out in support of issues like world peace and civil rights.

Taylor's carefully written narrative of the NCCP legitimates the hard work and valiant efforts of Communist activists in the South. Its strength comes from Taylor's use of numerous archival materials, including the recently-made-available Comintern files, and lesser-known publications, which enable him to explore the NCCP through all of its ups and downs. Taylor also resurrects small but significant newspapers such as the *Chadwick-Hoskin Worker*, the shop paper of the Chadwick-Hoskin Mill, and *Textile Workers Voice*, published for Erwin Mill workers, which detail rhetorical attempts by activists to reach workers. Taylor provides description of the papers' contents, but falls short on deeper analysis, leaving unexplored the party's symbolic efforts to achieve workplace justice. For instance, Taylor describes the efforts of the "popular" *Textile Workers Voice* to address strike issues and the problem of segregation. The *Chadwick-Hoskin Worker* provided the "Communist vision of capitalism" (p. 77) and took up the issue of militarism. Left wanting is an analysis of the strategies used by the papers to gain adherence to issues; that is, the description needs to be deepened by asking "how" and "why" questions. What images were relied upon and why? What metaphors were employed and why? How did the paper appeal to readers? How did the paper define the "enemy" and the "hero?" What connections, if any, were made between

workers' concerns and the Communist Party? Exploring some of these questions would lead to a fuller understanding of the ways that organizations attempted to persuade individuals and prompt action. Rather than conclude, as Taylor does of the *Textile Workers Voice*, that the "impact of the paper was minimal" (p. 173) due to the fact only a few workers joined the party, exploring the questions suggested above would provide insight into the ability of activists to draw from a storehouse of symbolic resources to win converts and convince their audience to take risks; a formidable task for any activist.

Furthermore, providing such an assessment necessarily requires the author to make judgments regarding historical efforts at social change, something that historians need not shy away from. Taylor does a fine job relating the strengths and weaknesses of the NCCP with clarity, if not scholarly detachment. His narrative would come to life, however, with assessments of the party that go beyond simply labeling strengths and weakness. For instance, Taylor's introduction initiates a potentially insightful analysis of Junius Scales's skills at persuasion, where he mentions Scales's use of the myth of Horatius to describe Communist Party efforts. Taylor might usefully have taken up the use of particular myths, common storylines, or vivid imagery by activists in an effort to assess not only what worked and what did not, but also why efforts succeeded or failed. In this way, Taylor and other historians might make their scholarship useful not only in uncovering previously ignored efforts, but in providing insights for those who continue to struggle for justice today.

Most notable in Taylor's narrative is his resurrection of the indefatigable efforts by ordinary people to obtain such basic goals as safe housing, decent education, unemployment insurance, hot lunches for school children, and the right to organize in a state marked by rural poverty and deep-seated racism. Some of these individuals, like bal-

adeer Ella Mae Wiggins, sacrificed their lives, Others, such as Junius Scales, spent time in jail, while Hans Freistadt's academic career in the United States was threatened. Such efforts were more than laudable; they were indeed heroic.

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

Citation: Mary E. Triage. Review of Taylor, Gregory S. *The History of the North Carolina Communist Party*. H-Southern-Industry, H-Net Reviews. October, 2009.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24772>



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