

# Race and Politics in Histories of the 20th-Century US Working Class

John Hendrix Hinshaw

Kenneth D. Durr, *Behind the Backlash: White Working-Class Politics in Baltimore, 1940-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2003)

Charles D. Chamberlain, *Victory at Home: Manpower and Race in the American South During World War II* (Athens: University of Georgia Press 2003)

Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2003)

Ruth Needleman, *Black Freedom Fighters in Steel: The Struggle for Democratic Unionism* (Cornell: ILR Press 2003)

LABOUR HISTORY is one of the most politicized fields within social history, although admittedly the political spectrum tends to run from liberal to unreconstructed Marxist. Yet for all of our political commitments, or perhaps because of them, our extensive and sophisticated knowledge of working-class history remains uneven. We know a great deal about the social history of radical movements, unions, and moments of high class struggle, particularly in the first half of the 20th century. We know far less about the far more pragmatic unions and political institutions that lasted until the century's end. It is telling that our knowledge about the IWW and the UE is far more extensive, and loving, than the organizations that dominated the actually existing organized workers' movement of the last 75 years, such as the Carpenters and the IBEW.

Labour history tends to work with the conventional methodologies and frameworks of social historians. Indeed, many of them were pioneered or perfected by labour historians. Consequently, like social history more generally, our understanding of where social history meets politics, particularly that of the mainstream of the working class, largely remains to be written. The major exception to

John Hendrix Hinshaw, "Race and Politics in Histories of the 20th-Century US Working Class," *Labour/Le Travail*, 56 (Fall 2005), 251-67.

this comes in the realm of racial politics, which is rightly viewed as a rough proxy for workers' class consciousness or false consciousness. In this realm, and in this collection of books, labour historians have developed a fairly nuanced understanding of the ways race has shaped the workplace, the neighbourhood, and the mores and ideals of workers. They also highlight the relatively crude methods, frameworks, and historiography that we have for understanding the political histories of capitalism's should-be gravediggers.

Many of the works under review focus on the 1930s and 1940s. These were the years that the CIO and the New Deal were forged and ultimately constrained. In that period, both the workers' movement and the newly created welfare state enjoyed the best effort and chance to reform America and finally fulfill the promise of democracy halted by the betrayal of Reconstruction three generations before. At this moment, the most social weight was cast behind movements and policies that pointed in the direction of colour-blind labour markets, housing markets, and public policies. That generation of labour and reformers would largely fail, of course, but their efforts would nonetheless reverberate throughout society. When the second reconstruction would come to fruition in the 1960s, it would owe much to this earlier period, as much or more to its defeats than its vibrant possibilities. But during the 1960s and 1970s, the forward momentum of the civil rights, feminist, and labour movements masked the growth of an ultimately much stronger conservative movement that has dominated the last 25 years of political life.

These works help us to understand, albeit unevenly, how we arrived at this political and historical juncture. One important aspect that arises from these works is that during the long summer of discontent in the 1930s, there was considerably less distance between labour, civil rights organizations, and liberal policy makers than there would be a generation or so later. And while labour organizations gained enormous organizational capacity during the Cold War years, and the civil rights movement more leverage over public opinion and policy makers, liberalism was already losing its nerve. In other words, LBJ heralded the Indian summer of liberalism, not its spring, and it was a weak if not crippled party that could not turn the Nixon administration's scandals of Laos, Vietnam, Watergate, etc. to its lasting advantage.

One school of thought, although not given much credence among labour historians, is that the New Left went too far in the 1960s and 1970s. The New Left antagonized the working-class base of the New Deal with its over-exuberant embrace of the counterculture, extreme feminism that assaulted the sanctity of the family, and violent and mindless protest against the Vietnam war, institutionalized racism, and "the establishment." Our field prefers to believe that liberalism failed due to the lasting corrosive effects of the bitter anti-communism directed against labour, liberals, civil rights groups, and of course the left, after 1948. During the demise of the New Deal, a process already begun by 1948 but intensified by McCarthyism, what was lost was the opportunity to marry working-class white politics to anti-racism

that spoke in a populist or at least popular voice, and not in the rarified tones and pinched vision of top-down driven policy as in the 1960s.

Whatever the cause, instead of interracial class solidarities directed at economic elites and political conservatives, hallmarks of the CIO left, what we have seen since the Civil Rights Act has been the polarization of race and class, and the defection of many working-class whites to a kind of populist Reaganism directed against an increasingly mythical liberal elite whose hidden powers and ruthlessness rival the Elders of Zion. Throughout America today, it is populism and the free market that have been married, a strange and sad state of affairs ably chronicled by Tom Franks in *What's the Matter With Kansas?* Together, these works provide us with the historical background that casts some light into the origins of the racial and class politics of America of the Reagan era and beyond.

Let us first begin with Robert Korstad's *Civil Rights Unionism*. Korstad chronicles the long rise and dramatic fall of an audacious left-led CIO union in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He shows how and why the tobacco industry thrived on the processing of an addictive regional crop, and how that industry itself, like Southern industrialists more generally, became addicted to low-wage labour assiduously divided into black and white, the most important ingredient in what he terms racial capitalism. One of the central actors in this story is R.J. Reynolds, the once small company that bucked the major monopolists of its day and developed into a New South success story. The company refashioned, one wants to say built, Winston-Salem in its own image. The marriage of paternalism, racism, and political control and repression yielded profits and a quiet company town. After numerous false starts, unionism did come to Winston-Salem in 1943, and it was a bottom-up affair based on the aspirations of a long-frustrated black workforce. The left-led CIO attracted enough whites to the union to begin collective bargaining on behalf of a sizeable portion of the workforce. The union made real wage gains, and provided the basis for equally important political mobilizations that threatened to reawaken the sleeping dragon of Southern populism. But, as the US shifted from war against fascism to its far more fervent war against communism, the radical union was beset by a host of powerful institutions. Despite heroic efforts to broaden its support among white workers, Local 22 of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers of America died in 1950.

At over 550 pages, this is an extensively researched and documented saga, a labour of love. Due to the destruction of most union records and the unwillingness of the company to open its archive, the author collected over 100 oral histories. The core of the analysis is on the decade or so that Local 22 existed, and its 10,000 black and a few hundred white members. The author also reaches into the post-bellum years to explain the ways class and racial politics fared under Reconstruction and Populism, and how those efforts were not only defeated but their memory suppressed in the name of creating so-called Southern tradition. "The more natural the dictates of white supremacy appeared, the greater the stability and longevity of the

system ... The late nineteenth century had been marked by great flux and experimentation; a new etiquette of white supremacy had to be learned as well as enforced. The more often a white woman received a deferential gesture from a black man, the more normal the deference became. Each time the mayor came from a particular neighborhood and church, the more it seemed that that had always been and would always be the case. Each year that a sharecropper, white or black, ended in debt, the more it seemed that unfreedom was a fixed way of life. Each morning on which a black tobacco worker entered through the 'Colored' door, the more segregation came to seem timeless and inevitable." (59) One generally reads stacks of books invoking workers' "agency" as the almost sole explanation for the thicket of facts and quotes; it is sadly rare to read so cogent an explanation of the importance of routinized social relationships in the maintenance of inequality.

For a few years, a vibrant rank-and-file unionism would challenge the makers of Camel cigarettes in the world's largest tobacco factory. Local 22 developed "civic unionism," drawing on the black social networks, churches, and community for its strength and taking many of its fights into the political arena. It challenged racial capitalism in Winston-Salem, not solely by mobilizing workers on the shop floor, but also by registering them to vote, building the NAACP and, in short, seeking to restart the fight for democracy halted by the rise of Jim Crow. In Korstad's view, Local 22 combined industrial unionism with civil rights, the fight to bring the New Deal to the South, a fight that overlapped in critical ways with the history of the Communist Party. Like many scholars, Korstad sees the CP as providing strengths, leadership, political vision, and networks, but also exposing the union to devastating liabilities that, combined with an aggressive defence of racial capitalism, was the undoing of the union. Korstad argues that the Wagner and Fair Labor Standard Acts [FLSA], as well as the federal system of industrial jurisprudence did not contribute to the creation of a labour bureaucracy, but provided workers with the tools to begin to democratize the workplace. Korstad argues that the view of the state that focuses on labour bureaucracy better fits the experiences of white workers in the North than blacks in the South, an important critique of that view of the New Deal that I wished the author had taken further.<sup>1</sup>

The author rightly argues that while the story of Local 22 is not that of the New Deal in miniature, or the cause of all of the limitations of the 20th century, it is an important story that contributes to our understanding of wider trends. At the same time, it is an extremely fine-grained analysis, and rather than summarize the entire book, let me provide snapshots of two critical events, the birth of the union through a sit-down strike in 1943 and its demise through a decertification election in 1950.

<sup>1</sup>For those who enjoy these kinds of fine-tuned studies in the construction of a democratic society in other places and times, I recommend Karl von Holdt's fine study of black steelworkers in the fight against apartheid: Karl von Holdt, *Transition from Below: Forging Trade Unionism and Workplace Change in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg 2003).

Contributing to the sit-down was the FLSA, which imposed minimal standards on the previously all-powerful Reynolds company. Furthermore, the CIO's food workers union had created a Tobacco Workers Organizing Committee that had been signing up black workers and developing leaders. Thus when the strike came, there was a network of union-minded workers with enough sense of their own strength, legal standing, and leadership skills to manage to turn a dispute in part of the plant into a work stoppage of all of the plant's black employees. When workers met with managers, the weight of years of racial "tradition" kept most workers silent, even after they had gone on strike. Finally, Theodosia Simpsons believed that her own financial situation was secure enough to allow her to speak. She informed the manager, who had invoked the war effort as preventing any wage increases, that "according to the Little Steel formula you can give us a wage increase." (21) The company lost its monopoly over expert knowledge and its aura of invincibility. The strike lasted a few more days, and as with many public displays of solidarity after years of repression, joy and defiance mingled together. Backed by a national union, supported by war-time labour shortages and friendly labour laws, and buoyed by their own strength, workers won a union contract.

For the next several years, Local 22 would challenge all that R.J. Reynolds had built. The union aggressively fought against unequal wages between men and women, blacks and whites, the foundation of racial capitalism that exploited all workers, some more than others. The union also challenged the company's aura of Jim Crow benevolence and the socio-political networks that the company had built between itself and middle-class blacks. The union's existence, and victories on and off company property, undermined the myth of black inferiority and powerlessness. And because the union had attracted a core of white allies at work and in the political arena, providing some reality to the dreams of a Southern Popular Front, the foundation of Jim Crow itself had begun to crack, if not crumble.

The fall of Local 22 supports the cynical adage that no good deed goes unpunished. The union survived a company-induced strike in 1947, amidst much red-baiting; it came through, but it did so in rough shape. For months, the union struggled to get all of its members back to work as the company continued to retain scabs. As Reynolds had also mechanized many of the jobs held by black workers, the workforce was getting whiter and therefore the union was bleeding members and losing strength. Local 22 resolved to recruit more whites to the union, a move easier said than done. The union met with some success, but Reynolds was on guard and countered every move. As with blacks, a dense network of kin, church, social and political networks bound whites to each other, and this worked to the company's advantage. One likely leader folded because, as he told his neighbour, "they were threatening my wife," who also worked at the plant. "'You couldn't understand it unless you lived all your life in this town. When I see you tomorrow, I'm not going to speak to you.' And that was the end of him." (350-351) And while the local could call upon left luminaries such as Woody Guthrie to play at dances for

whites, communists' over-eagerness to combat white supremacy at every turn led them to blunders such as turning white membership cards over to the company before they had attracted a sufficient number. The move exposed whites to retaliation rather than building solidarity, and most whites disavowed the union. Had the union succeeded in establishing itself among whites, those self-same networks could have been the basis of considerable union power, but the union never displaced workers' loyalty or fear of the company.

Having done so much for democracy, Local 22 engendered enormous ill will amongst right-wing notables. Congressman Richard Nixon and HUAC came to town to have a go at the local, as did William Casey, who would go on from his intelligence work tracking communist subversion to head the CIA. The company enlisted the aid of the FBI and Norman Vincent Peale's version of Christian brotherhood. Most damning was the loss of support from the centrists in the CIO. After Local 22 joined Gideon's Army, the Henry Wallace campaign for President in 1948, Philip Murray and the CIO joined the AFL in trying to raid the local. Middle-class allies, black and white, some of whom unionists had elected, often broke and ran. When the final showdown came, the union probably would have won if it had signed the Taft-Hartley anti-communist affidavits earlier than it did. Left principles here cost them dearly. Similarly, had the NLRB in 1950 been more sympathetic and thrown out a hundred or so white supervisors' votes, the union would have won. But Local 22 lost its last ballot, by 66 votes out of more than 8,700 cast.

If the left CIO unions had remained in that federation, had Operation Dixie succeeded, and if Local 22 had not only survived but expanded, the subsequent history of the South, of civil rights, of labour more generally, certainly would have been a happier tale. There were some connections between Local 22 and later radical movements, such as the North Carolina Black Panther Party, but in the main, the civil rights movement, when it came to the area, tackled Jim Crow but not racial capitalism. The left lost most of its capacity to organize, labour and civil rights stuck closer to the political mainstream, and the connections to earlier struggles were largely lost.

If *Civil Rights Unionism* examines the effort to build democracy, a second Reconstruction, and the New Deal, largely from the bottom up, *Victory at Home* offers a clearer view on the effects of social policy, chiefly from the top down. Chamberlain explores the federal government's efforts during World War II, through the War Manpower Commission and other agencies, to mobilize labour to defeat fascism abroad and weaken Jim Crow labour markets throughout the South. The author chiefly relies upon federal and state records and the familiar interpretative device of workers' agency to examine how they were acted upon and in turn shaped the policies of the federal government, employers, and local and regional elites. Someone has to play the straw man, and in this case it is the liberal writers and photographers who attempted to draw attention to southern poverty and arguably portrayed southern workers as hapless flotsam drifting backwards in a sea of misery.

As the author states, “no longer the stereotypical white migrant family documented by Dorothea Lange and Agnes Meyer, southern workers and their families have emerged as diverse, active agents of their own destinies during the war as they utilized a variety of strategies, including migration, institution building, and labor organizing to improve their lives and gain economic security.” (4) The question of fair employment served as a “harbinger of battles over civil and states’ rights after the war” with this book providing a “regional synthesis of this struggle for equality and, specifically, the ways in which local African American civil rights and labor activists initiated an indigenous jobs movement with support from liberal allies in the FEPC and the War Manpower Commission across the South and Southwest.” (5) While such efforts were not fully successful, they “enabled the region’s working families to gain unprecedented geographic and economic mobility and in the process threatened the South’s culture of poverty and dependence” that the region’s ruling class fostered and depended upon.

The South’s elites had hoped to embark upon a process of industrialization that would absorb the million or more agricultural workers and sharecroppers displaced from the soil in the 1930s by “balancing agriculture with industry,” and leaving intact the “traditional” relationships between the bottom and top sills of society. Thus while elites welcomed wartime industrialization and defence spending in a way that they never had with other New Deal projects; enthusiasm was tempered by the knowledge that the mass movement of the rural poor from field to factory had the potential to upset elites’ paternalistic control over them. During the war, huge numbers of workers flocked to shipyards, factories, and mills looking for a better life promised not only by paid employment but the New Deal that was mobilizing them into the domestic trenches of the fight against anti-democratic forces abroad.

But, for local elites, and many white workers, upholding white supremacy was the first priority. Agriculture did not want to lose control over agricultural labour, especially those housed within black skins, which dovetailed nicely with urban elites’ preference for white rural migrants obtaining defence jobs rather than local black workers. Consequently wartime industrialization sparked a group of migrants whose industrial skills ranged from the nonexistent to highly skilled who flooded Southern boom towns, overwhelming the local supply of housing, and creating shanty towns or trailer parks. While the national government might have supplied the defence contracts, state and local officials were not about to cede control to their federal counterparts over housing or urban planning. The unwillingness of Southern elites to break with *laissez-faire* principles, and white supremacy, compounded the social chaos.

Chamberlain reveals the varied political agendas of federal agencies and other actors in tackling the manpower problems of the South (what Korstad would say were the outcomes of decades of racial capitalism). The War Manpower Commission and the US Employment Service were generally willing to accede to Southern demands to maintain white privileges in job markets, while the Fair Employment



Practices Commission was the province of liberals who viewed the fight against discrimination as part and parcel of the war effort. The FEPC's allies were left-wing labour organizations and black organizations upset that, as of 1942, African Americans remained frozen out of most defence work — and that critical industries like shipbuilding remained short of workers. The resulting “jobs movement” helped to solidify the organizational skills and social and political networks of a layer of black leaders throughout the South. Until 1943, the jobs movement's powerful foes (employers, various political machines, and the white-dominated AFL) limited blacks' access to defence jobs and helped sideline the FEPC (Chamberlain does not rehash how and why FDR's government bolstered the conservative AFL over its more radical and liberal rival). But as labour shortages began to grow, as most white men found jobs, the WMC began to indirectly challenge Jim Crow by such means as paying blacks' transportation costs to employers who would hire them.

Such efforts challenged, albeit indirectly, the control of Southern lumber and agriculture over black workers, leading many workers to “fuse the concepts of mobility and freedom.” (71) Farm interests, well represented in the Southern wing of the Democratic Party, sought to retain control over “their” labour. Consequently ignored by the Wagner Act, agricultural workers were unable to raise wages *via* unions, as had defence workers. But the war provided farm workers with unprecedented opportunities to migrate to better-paying defence work. Thus migration to the North and West was the biggest challenge that workers presented to rural elites, and pried open the rural South to national labour markets, and, to a lesser degree, to national policies.

One of the legacies of the popular mobilizations of the war years was the growth of black voting throughout the South. In 1946, a variety of civil rights and labour organizations advanced the boundaries of black enfranchisement towards fuller, though hardly complete, enfranchisement. But the forces of reaction quickly rolled back such gains, and weakened the size and scope of black advocacy organizations such as the National Urban League. The forward momentum that carried both civil rights and labour forward had slowed, as symbolized by the failure of Operation Dixie. Subsequently, a chastened and increasingly conservative labour movement shrank back from the bold goals of social and economic equality, but still helped register “important economic goals as wage differentials based on region and race became less common after the war.” (198) While industrialization and Cold War military spending continued to remake the economic world of the South, most industries remained non-union, most rural workers remained trapped in poverty, and blacks and women assumed subordinate positions. Sadly, one of the best options for ambitious workers was migration out of the region.

More than a few Southern migrants found jobs in the Northern steel industry around Gary and Chicago, and some of them appear in Ruth Needleman's lively *Black Freedom Fighters*. Needleman investigates the ways that race, or more particularly whites and African Americans, shaped a major industrial union, the



United Steelworkers of America [USWA]. The USWA shaped the industry, and in Needleman's account, the region around Gary, Indiana, for 50 years. This is an engaging and lively work, far more so than the average monograph which is earnest, well documented, and dull.

During the 1930s and 1940s the USWA organized workers in one of the most important and powerful industries in the United States. Until the 1970s, the USWA retained the momentum, and forced companies to concede numerous and generous gains in pay, working conditions, and benefits. Without the union, workers' rights on the job would likely have remained much the same, something like today's so-called associates at companies like Wal-Mart, only with more discrimination and far more hazardous conditions. From the grimmer perspective of labour today, the USWA's accomplishments are somewhat staggering for their breadth, depth, and speed. The union made less progress on the issue of discrimination, particularly when it came to the institutionalized discrimination of companies in allocating jobs, or the seniority system that reinforced those inequalities. There are scholars, and many in the union itself, who hold that the USWA overcame racism easily and early in its history. Needleman is not one of them. She shows that the struggles against racism in the "enlightened" North were bitter and often cast trade unionists at odds with each other. This was not just a fight between black and white, but between those whites who would ally with blacks, and vice versa, and on what terms. Indeed, many of the blacks would oppose each other over the years. Some scholars, like many retired trade unionists, seem to believe that to focus on the persistence of institutionalized racism in the steel industry, and the USWA, is tantamount to a betrayal of workers' larger class interests. Needleman holds that most of the workers she studied were politically sophisticated enough to be unswerving advocates of unionism, but harsh critics of their allies — a necessary, if unpleasant, battle in the larger class war.

Somewhat unusual amongst labour history monographs, Needleman has centred her study around the sustained biographies of five key black activists who individually and collectively helped to shape the workplace, union, and civil rights movement in Northwest Indiana. In some ways, her study follows the familiar contours of the hard work amongst the complicated personal, political, and shop floor networks that it took to organize industrial unionism amongst a vast and complex workforce. Like other practitioners of oral history, she uses ample quotations to reconstruct the worldview, and better than most, the personalities, of these black freedom fighters. Some of the men whose histories she narrates began their lives in the Deep South, and she explores the ways race and power were constructed, and opposed, in that arena, and how that compared to and influenced them when they entered the more complex world of race, power, and ethnicity in Gary's mills.

These men were committed activists, and as such, we learn an enormous amount about their goals, tactics, alliances, and their cool-headed assessments of their victories and defeats. Each of the five men reveals a type of personality, to

some extent a generation of worker, and certainly a style of politics within the biggest district in the second largest union in the CIO. Each owes something to the others, each was often allied with the others, and each certainly fought against the others. The collective portrait tells us a great deal about the world of the most politicized black workers and their pride in the accomplishments of their union, and their frustrations with what their union left undone. These men, like its narrator, are unabashed advocates of industrial unionism, although Needleman finds the top-down culture of the USWA to blame for many of the union's shortcomings; a culture of participatory democracy would have been far more preferable.

Politics in the USWA was very much a contact sport, and the white or immigrant left, generally the allies of black activists, often held their own against their conservative (or at least more conservative) opponents. The left and black workers held their own better in Gary and Chicago than almost anywhere else in the union besides Youngstown, which unlike Chicago, was already in decline in the 1950s. Unlike Pittsburgh, the left in Chicagoland held on into the Cold War, although the shift in political climate exacted the usual and well-known toll on them. When democratic opposition arose to the union's leadership, it often arose out of the socio-political networks in the big mills and locals of Chicago and Youngstown (as well as the more tightly controlled districts such as Pittsburgh). The culture of democratic opposition to the union's often undemocratic leadership was sustained by these veteran unionists, who remained attuned to the complex and shifting ethno-racial/political configurations in the big mills and vast locals.

For skilled activists, the union was both an ally and an adversary. It could also become an employer, a fact that caused no end of controversy and dissension amongst one-time allies. Certainly the dearth of black employees at the District and International level was a perennial complaint of black activists. But it was invariably controversial when one activist was elevated. Was he a sell-out? Was he simply more knowledgeable, and able to fight more effectively from the inside? When the union hired black activists was it weakening black caucuses? Needleman's answer seems to be yes, although that is not the only reason the union did so.

Those questions and concerns suffused the most significant black caucus in the union, the Ad Hoc Committee in Steel. After decades of at best local or district-wide black organization, in the 1960s activists built a national movement that mobilized pressure on the white liberals who ran the union. The success of what amounted to a civil rights caucus also led the union to cherry-pick its leaders; whether by design or natural causes, the Ad Hoc movement slowly died. The movement's most lasting accomplishment was the series of lawsuits throughout the country against the implementation of the seniority system that maintained the degree of segregation that persisted in the industry. Since seniority was generally administered by local unions, within the contractual framework negotiated at the national level, it makes sense that after years of frustration within scattered locals, a national movement would emerge with the goal of applying pressure on the inter-

national union to desegregate the workplace. The reader comes away with a greater sense of union politics in these years than the ways and reasons why companies sustained bigotry and institutionalized discrimination, presumably to maintain their social control of the workforce, or how and why the wider civil rights movement, or the liberalism of the Johnson years, helped or sustained these workers.

If students of politics always do well to “follow the money,” the key to many histories is to follow the documentation. Ruth Needleman relies heavily on oral history, which has the happy result of a highly readable, important, and otherwise lost account of black movements in heavy industry. She identifies with her participants to a large degree, and if she eschews objectivity, her perspective is made openly, and if she is biased, she is as well documented as is possible given the current state of available methods and archival collections. No doubt some incriminating documents from the union entered the circular file rather than the archive. And as anyone who has conducted oral histories knows, few interviews dwell upon their darker deeds or blind spots. Yet the USWA, or relevant government agencies, has opened its archives, and therefore itself, to a scrutiny that steel companies, or even government agencies, have avoided. Therefore it is hardly surprising, that like other labour histories, Needleman’s provides a better sense of how democratic union activists manoeuvred within the political world of the union than how they did in the less well documented, but arguably the more important and larger worlds of corporate policy, electoral politics, public policy (or equally likely, the lack thereof), or political economy. In my view, bridging the world of relatively fine-grained studies of locals, mills, and unions, and the world of equally important but less well documented institutions is the next frontier of labour history. If historians can write with the passion, verve, and sensitivity of Ruth Needleman, we will be well served.

Many scholars hide, or attempt to hide, behind the guise of objectivity — and often in the thickets of unreadable prose. Not Needleman. She has worked for years in labour education in Gary, which allowed her access to the social networks of black steelworkers. Teaching and learning from unionized workers taught her a few things that she endeavoured to pass along. The first lesson is just how hard workers had to fight for better wages, benefits, and working conditions. It was hard in the years before globalization and, clearly, it has not gotten any easier, but the fight is both noble and winnable. The second is that unionism remains the solution to many of the problems of workers, although the culture of unionism, and its level and quality of democracy, is vitally important to the success of the workers’ movement. The rights and perspectives of women and minority workers are vitally connected to the health of democracy, and the success of unionism. Related to that is her view that union democracy and egalitarian political vision was sustained by its left wing and betrayed by its right. Finally, she advocates that democracy and unions will be well served by caucuses for women and minorities. While other historians, people in labour studies, or trade unionists themselves will doubtlessly disagree with some or all of her arguments, hopefully all would agree that asking what is the point of this

study, and what lessons does it offer people today are questions worth addressing openly and frankly.

It is no great secret that our political representatives lack the courage of Needleman's convictions. Perhaps that was always the case, although it seems to be getting worse by the week. When I was growing up in the 1970s, the Democratic Party, the party of the "common man," enjoyed massive majorities in Congress, state houses, and governorships. But even then the Democratic Party had begun to unravel in the face of an increasingly aggressive (and broader) conservative movement and more vigorous (and numerous) Republican Party. What gave conservatism a broader base was the defection of numerous white workers to it. Analysts disagree whether "centrists" like Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Al Gore are the cause or the consequence of the failure of liberalism. But having a Democratic president who deregulated airlines and trucking (like Carter) or opened up "free trade" to Mexico and later China (as with Clinton) certainly indicates the far more hostile terrain that workers and labour have found themselves on since 1977.

Many scholars have concluded that the challenge to the New Deal has been due to the politics of race, particularly in the South. Even as Lyndon Johnson signed into law the civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s, he predicted that the Democratic Party would lose that once loyal region. Indeed, Southern whites, particularly white men, changed their electoral loyalties with a vengeance. (In 2004, far less than a quarter of Southern white men voted Democratic.) This defection has been made more critical by the demographic rise of the South and the solidly Republican West — the so-called Sun Belt, and the economic and then demographic decline of the Snow or Rust Belt states. The shift of many white workers from the Democratic to the Republican parties was not just confined to the former Confederate states, as many Reagan Democrats were located in the blue-collar suburbs of the North and Midwest. Thus to many, the politics of race has been crucial to the rise of modern conservatism.

Kenneth Durr challenges that convention, or at least attempts to complicate that interpretation. As many trade unionists have observed, the Democratic Party of today is not the same organization of a generation ago, much less the one that built the New Deal. Durr argues that white workers in Baltimore extended political support to the Democratic Party and its New Deal, but only to the extent that it defended their families, neighbourhoods, and workplaces. In time, liberalism would undermine their neighbourhoods, in large part due to desegregation, and white workers would defect. However, in the early years of the New Deal, workers' support for the Democrats was as unproblematic as the government's programs were unambiguously beneficial to workers' jobs, houses, and neighbourhoods. The New Deal created the laws and policies that raised wages through unions, Social Security, unemployment insurance, etc. The federal government also made it easier for workers to purchase homes. Durr argues that workers enjoyed the expansion of their rights to the security of their livelihoods, homes, social networks, and, equally

importantly, to their conservative social mores. Their fundamental political perspective never changed; what did was the commitment of the Democratic Party to them.

Durr largely deals in the perceptions of white blue-collar workers, an important but treacherous terrain to operate upon or document. Liberals are not the heroes of this story; they are the elites that wrote editorials for the *Baltimore Sun* or ran the Democratic Party from the country club. They supported desegregation because they would not suffer any consequences from it (private swimming pools, or those at the country club, were never integrated) and they disparaged those who opposed desegregation. Another wing of liberals were those union leaders with limited ability to mobilize their members beyond bread-and-butter issues. Liberalism abandoned the language and interests of the white working class, particularly when it sought to dismantle segregation which put the schools, neighbourhoods, and homes (and later jobs) of workers at risk. Consequently, liberals relied on the courts more than the electoral process or the editorial page (or television coverage) over letters to the editor, discussions in neighbourhood hangouts, or quickly organized picket lines. In time, white workers would embrace the economic populism and (in retrospect) moderate racism of George Wallace before defecting to Republicans who articulated the defence of “traditional culture and values,” such as Spiro Agnew, Richard Nixon, and ultimately Ronald Reagan.

The first economic benefit of the New Deal was the rapid expansion of Charm City’s economic base through military spending during World War II. The expansion of jobs, most notably the shipyards, however, attracted large numbers of migrants from the countryside who competed with native Baltimoreans for jobs and housing. For most labour historians, the most politically salient feature of working-class conservatism would be their embrace of segregation. By contrast, Durr suggests that it is revealing that the wartime influx of whites from Appalachia, the so-called Hillbillies, led Baltimore’s natives to dig in their heels to defend their neighbourhoods. In Durr’s view, Baltimore’s working class were old-fashioned conservatives who simply sought to preserve familiar traditions, and demographics, that infused their lives with meaning. In short order, however, “hillbillies” joined Catholic immigrants and native white Baltimoreans behind the colour line and the line of tradition would shift to accommodate them.

Durr acknowledges that while black residents made up almost 20 per cent of the population, they remained squeezed within just 2 per cent of the city’s space. However, Baltimore’s long-delayed desegregation, and the way it was implemented, would drive a wedge between white workers and liberal Democrats. Whites increasingly viewed liberalism as linked to judicial decrees, such as the 1954 Supreme Court ruling that struck down the legality of racially segregated schools. Whites mobilized in defence of their rights and heritage against the indifference and condescension of the city’s newspaper, courts, school boards, and civic leaders.

Durr argues that whites upheld segregated schools and neighbourhoods, in large part because that was the basis for their community and culture. Many of his arguments go against the grain of scholastic conventional wisdom. He argues that working-class whites opposed block busting, whereby realtors broke a white block by selling a house to a black family because it was exploitative to black families who paid a premium for housing. Black families were manipulated and exploited by realtors who reaped the profits, and white workers often lost much of the value of the biggest financial and emotional investment they had made. Since African Americans paid a premium for housing, far in excess of its worth or often their ability to pay, many proved unable to maintain the older homes and the neighbourhoods suffered decline. For white workers, the unwillingness of elected officials to preserve the quality of their neighbourhoods did not lead them to anti-black violence, as in industrial cities in the North, but it did create “a dim realization that events in the city — indeed, even events in their own neighborhoods — were beyond locals’ control.” (102) More than that, it created the impression of “injustices perpetuated by an establishment that favored blacks at the expense of whites.” (103)

Durr does not raise the point that the New Deal had not directly challenged the ways housing markets were Jim Crowed; indeed, the federal government, beginning in the mid-1930s, actually strengthened it through the FHA, which standardized the red-lines of banks that starved black and mixed-race neighbourhoods of capital. White workers’ homes and neighbourhoods, like those of the middle class, benefited from generous housing subsidies simply unavailable to blacks, and unacknowledged by whites conditioned to see blacks as simultaneously pampered by government and inexplicably poor. In short, Baltimore’s white working class, rather like American conventional wisdom, and to some extent Durr himself, missed the importance of the way the New Deal was racialized. For instance, Durr acknowledges some of the structural changes that undermined black neighbourhoods (having paid a premium for housing, blacks received poor city services and could still only access low paying jobs) and concludes, “This curious argument, still being made by scholars of residential change, accurate though it may have been in absolving blacks of personal responsibility, overlooked the simple fact that regardless of who was to blame, the effect was the same: neighborhoods did deteriorate when blacks moved in, and whites were correct in pointing this out.” (100)

As blacks gained access to Charm City’s schools and neighbourhoods, the city began to decline. As Durr observes, much of the decline had nothing to do with race. The city’s aging industries shed jobs or closed entirely. Superhighways allowed white-collar workers in the downtown to commute further and further from their jobs, and white flight exacerbated the deterioration of the city in the 1960s. (Ironically, when the city would later gentrify, many white workers had already borne the cost of white flight by moving to the suburbs.)



Durr is not particularly interested in the workplace, although he does analyse the ways liberalism and desegregation undermined whites' sense of security. A case in point was Bethlehem Steel's Sparrow Point. In 1956 a white conservative steelworker, using nakedly racial appeals, ousted liberal and moderate unionists who had built an electoral alliance with black workers. The International USWA ultimately removed the new president, who claimed, in the midst of HUAC investigations that revealed five communists at Bethlehem Steel, that the International USWA removed him because he was a "God-fearing anti-communist." (108) As in many locals where the International had intervened, a common enough practice at this time (particularly in the midst of the widespread challenge to the International leadership of the union), the white demagogue appealed to the rights of the (white) majority to elect whomever they chose. Durr finds that "the language of white rights, let alone of 'white supremacy', was at a dead end. Appeals to other kinds of rights were becoming increasingly more accurate." In the years to come, the local union would be polarized by "black activism" appealing to that third of the membership, and "mounting white discontent." (109)

When desegregation came in the 1970s, it cost employers little but white workers paid a great cost (or at least had their sense of security upset), and its implementation discredited the liberal state. In 1973, as a result of federal intervention (black pressure to do so goes unmentioned), black workers long shunted into the dirtiest, most dangerous, and lowest paid work and seniority units gained the right to bump whites from jobs. The result was turmoil, but was relieved a year later as a result of a nation-wide consent decree from a federal judge in Alabama. As with neighbourhoods, the only way blacks gained in the workplace came at the cost of their white counterparts. Expecting white workers not to resent this was expecting "a level of altruism seldom expected of others." (190) After this point, "the streams of outright racism ... flowed imperceptibly into a broader tide of resentment against government abrogation of individual rights and advancement by merit. The key is that whereas the former cannot be defended, the latter can." (191)

The fact that the Democrats, and the liberal state they built, undermined whites' job security, local control over schools, and neighbourhoods, and did nothing to stem the crime and cultural changes that threatened the family led workers to shift their allegiances to conservatism and ultimately the Republican party. For instance, in 1968, Wallace benefited from whites' resentment against the fall of segregation and from changes to seniority rights. Although the USWA backed the winner, the union was unable to convince many of its members to vote for their candidate. Because Wallace believed in states' rights, and local control over schools and unions, and that parents knew what was best for their children, "Wallace seemed to accord white working people the dignity and respect that other Democratic leaders had withdrawn." (122) The Alabama racialist and populist got almost two-thirds of the vote in white blue-collar wards in Baltimore. Wallace "tapped the reservoir of race, admixing only so much anti-communism, cultural nostalgia, and



right-wing economics as necessary for effect.” (125) The “power of the new social conservatism, then, came not from the alchemist’s wizardry, but from the long-term vitality of the populist impulse in American history. It also benefited, and still does today, from the fact that liberals — civil rights leaders and historians among them — have so consistently underestimated it.” (125)

Throughout the 1960s, urban white neighbourhoods deteriorated. Street crime increased, which combined with the expansion of the ghetto and the rise of black activism to accelerate white flight. While whites had little use for overt white supremacy, they had even less for hippies, civil rights, or anti-Vietnam demonstrations. White workers’ support for Democrats consistently stopped at the issue of integrated neighbourhoods. And in 1966, whites helped push an opponent of open housing and advocate of having the police “hit first, fire first” to the top of the Democratic ticket for governor. By contrast, Republican Spiro Agnew appeared more moderate, and won the support of blacks in the inner city and suburban whites. Once in office, however, Agnew responded to the spiraling murder rate and street crime that “to blue-collar Baltimoreans ... seemed explicitly linked to the failures of liberal government” (139) that could not protect its citizens but only raised taxes. And those taxes seemed only to go to support those on welfare.

After an April 1968 riot in Baltimore that left several dead and millions of dollars in damage, Agnew broke with civil rights leaders, who had sought to maintain relations with black power advocates in SNCC. Appealing to white workers, Agnew reminded them that each white in the meeting had “worked his way to the top.” (142-43) The fact that many black activists walked out on the man that they had helped to elect did not matter. Agnew crystallized the views of many whites that they had worked for what they had and that liberal government sought to coddle and reward those who wouldn’t and could only protest, steal, or burn. Within the year, he was vice-president in a “law and order” administration, many of whose leading members would resign in disgrace or serve brief terms in prison.

But Agnew’s resignation to avoid impeachment for bribery lay in the future. When he gave that speech, “most remaining vestiges of race talk passed out of the language of working-class resentment ... ‘racism’ explained little, ‘liberalism’ explained much.” (144) Each wave of liberal activism, for more civil rights and against the Vietnam War, drove the wedge between liberals and white workers deeper and deeper. While white workers came to oppose the Vietnam War as a rich man’s fight on behalf of rich men, they bitterly resented the middle-class students, and especially priests and ministers, who protested that war. Of course, whites had protested against the end of segregation in the 1950s, and opposed busing in the 1970s and the ways highways destroyed working-class neighbourhoods. But nothing, it seemed, could stem the economic troubles of working families in the 1970s when inflation and the steady rise of two-income households undermined the traditional family. The end result was the rise of the Reagan Democrat in Baltimore and elsewhere.

At times, Durr overstates the particulars of his case, as after 1980 Baltimore and Maryland remained one of the most dependable Democratic polities in the country. He is correct to note (if he does not explore) that many workers responded to the crisis of liberalism, and the allures of Reaganism, by simply not voting. But as Durr would doubtlessly concede, the political mind of white workers is nothing if not contradictory, and certainly important. Durr's work will join a lively debate about the origins and maintenance of working-class conservatism. Undoubtedly more scholars will join the debate on this critical subject.

Taken together, these works indicate the importance and limitations of race to our understanding of working-class politics. While race is an important dimension of class consciousness and organization, or political commitment, it is not the whole story. Likewise, while unions are the most important organization of workers, we need to better understand the worlds of unorganized labour, of disorganized labour, of the third of workers who consistently vote against unions in the workplace (or their candidates in elections). Durr's work is indicative of the need of labour historians to go beyond the workplace and the unions to explore the ways in which workers interact with other social institutions to refashion their political consciousness and organization. Scholars would also do well to question their assumptions about the working class and to dig into the complex and vexed history of class and racial politics, particularly in the periods of "normalcy" that do much to mould the conventional wisdom that so often results in working-class cynicism rather than syndicalism. (The interpretative device or paradigm of "agency" is now so overworked as to be nearly meaningless; at any rate, agency is so open to the interpretation of the author that we would do well to limit, if not ban, its invocation.) To ignore that messy world, where most workers do not assume the burdens of heroism, and where those that do often fail or are ignored or scorned by those in whose name they labour, is to doom ourselves to irrelevance or wilful ignorance.

Magazines Canada

Atwood.  
Coupland.  
Davies. Heti.  
Ondaatje.  
Urquhart.

We have our own library.  
We have our own magazines.

Look for this icon at newsstands or  
subscribe online to hundreds of magazines  
on every conceivable topic.



[magazinescanada.ca](http://magazinescanada.ca)