

Race, Class, and Radicalism in the 20th Century US South

Tuesday 12 May 2020, by [GOLDFIELD Michael](#), [POST Charles](#) (Date first published: 10 May 2020).

Mainstream commentators in the US, both liberal and conservative, tend to portray the South as a region whose culture makes it a permanent bastion of reactionary, racist, and anti-labor politics. Michael Goldfield's new book, *The Southern Key: Race, Class and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (Oxford University Press, 2020), challenges these truisms, revealing the possibilities for a racially egalitarian industrial unionism in the South during and after the Great Depression and how the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) squandered those opportunities. *Spectre's* Charlie Post interviews Mike Goldfield about his provocative contribution to discussions of race and class in the US.

Why did you decide to write yet another book on labor organizing in the US South in the 1930s and 1940s—a field that has been researched by many other scholars?

Well, I originally planned to write a book on the failure of Operation Dixie, the Congress of Industrial Organization's (CIO) attempt after World War II to organize the South. I saw this failure as a major turning point in U.S. history. There was very little written on it at the time, much of it quite "lightweight." I was also inspired by a thesis by William Regensburger that claimed that those who relied on oral history (especially interviewing so-called CIO liberals who held union positions in the South) had it all wrong. As I began doing archival work on Operation Dixie, I was struck by how racially obtuse and incompetent these so-called liberals were—that Operation Dixie itself, contrary to my initial assumption, was not a serious attempt to organize, thus not a major turning point. It was a coda to a series of deeper failures, whose roots lay elsewhere.

In addition, there are thousands of in-depth, detailed, and often interesting studies of Southern labor, mostly of union locals or towns, occasionally studies of whole unions. However, there were few studies that looked at the broader issues and terrain of Southern labor organizing in the period, and none that looked at international comparisons, which I believed was a prerequisite for understanding the deeper issues at stake. A good example of this problem is the many hundreds of studies of the Southern textile industry. The overwhelming majority of these studies attribute the difficulty of organizing textile workers to the alleged culture of paternalism, Southern workers' lack of militancy, and the types of repression in the South. I found these explanations unconvincing because textile workers were highly militant, and Southern coal miners had a similar culture and faced much of the same sort of repression while successfully organizing. I spent a good bit of time studying textile workers in all the major textile-producing countries over the past few centuries (a book in itself), only a brief summary of which is in the book. I concluded that textile struggles everywhere (with highly varied cultures) had the same problems, with a few exceptions, based on the economics of the industry and the lack of structural power that textile workers had, especially compared to coal miners.

In *The Southern Key*, you focus on several key industries—coal mining, steel production,

lumbering, and textiles. Why did you choose these industries and how did they pose different opportunities and challenges for industrial unionism in the 1930s and 1940s?

Well, first I studied and did research on union organizing in virtually every industry in the country, especially all those active in the South. To write about all of these would have led to a book of many thousands of pages, which as I suggest in my preface, would have been of no interest to any publisher, and perhaps a few of my friends. So, I anguished about leaving out longshore, oil, and some of the left-wing unions like Mine Mill, which was so central to the story in Alabama. In the end, I decided to focus on the two largest industries in the South, textile and wood, both of which were mostly unorganized. I also decided to focus on two major unions that were successful in the South. Foremost were the coal miners, who were successful in the South, as well as the nation as a whole. Although not a left-wing union, they were progressive to an extent on racial issues, and were the vanguard (contrary to the claims often made that it was auto workers) of the whole upsurge and organizing during the 1930s and 1940s. I was interested in their trajectory as a whole; including how and why they eventually degenerated into such a backward union. As with textile workers, economic factors were central. The steel workers were another important case, originally organized largely by members of the Communist Party (CP), who ceded control to Philip Murray and the CIO liberals. The Steelworkers' union, never very democratic, but initially ostensibly anti-racist, quickly degenerated into a racist, authoritarian, and brutal union—contrary to the claims of virtually all writers, who tended to whitewash Murray. It was also another union where, evidence to the contrary, most commentators denied the historic militancy of steelworkers.

Wood was also especially interesting for a number of reasons. First, it had several hundred thousand workers in the South, at least half of whom were African-American. They had considerable structural power and appeared even to the CIO liberals to be easily organizable. They were not organized, largely because of the right-wing leadership of the union, who even the CIO liberals saw as incompetent. Yet, the union originally had a popular left-wing CP leadership which was committed to organizing Southern woodworkers. Yet, the CIO national office led an eventually successful campaign to oust the left-wingers and install the incompetents in 1939 and 1940. This story is important for several reasons. First, it belies the generally accepted view that the anti-communist purges did not begin until after World War II. Second, it raises the question of why the CIO leaders, who were generally committed to organizing the South, would install a leadership group that was did not share this commitment and who they knew to be incompetent.

What was the strategy of the “center” leadership of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO), in particular John L. Lewis, Sidney Hillman and Phillip Murray, for organizing two of the key Southern industries, lumber and textiles, before World War II? How did their strategy shape the CIO’s attempt to organize the South after the war—“Operation Dixie”?

Let us step back a bit and explore one of the main theses of my book. That is, what gives various groups of workers power in society, power to organize, to better their conditions, to inspire other workers, and ultimately to lead in the taking of power in society? I argue, drawing on and modifying the seminal work of sociologists Beverly Silver and Erik Olin Wright, that there are two types of power that workers have. First, is their structural power, which has several components. Can they be easily replaced? Partly that depends on the state of the labor market. Coal miners, e.g., when they strike could not be easily replaced by anyone other than skilled coal miners. No one in their right mind goes into a coal mine, often hundreds of feet below the surface, using dynamite to loosen coal, unless they know what they are doing. So, during large-scale coal union strikes, coal miners could not be replaced. As their picket signs proclaimed when troops came to take over the mines, “You can’t mine coal with bayonets.” During the 1970 postal workers’ strike, the Nixon administration found they could not move the mail (essential for Wall Street at the time) by calling in

the National Guard, and had to capitulate. When workers don't stick together (as in the 1981 air traffic controllers' strike) and there are replacements available (military controllers), strikes can be broken.

Centrality to a business or the economy is also important for structural leverage. That is why college professors, who may have irreplaceable skills, have little leverage when they strike, since they do minimal harm to their universities or the economy. On the other hand, even workers who are replaceable, when the labor market is extremely tight, as during the world wars, have more leverage.

Now, all workers benefit from outside support, what I call associative power. This was especially evident during the 1930s, and was one of the reasons that the strike and organizing waves were distinctive from other periods. The massive movements of the unemployed, farmers, civil rights groups, students, and others, often provided critical support to workers' struggles. As we know, this was critical to the struggles of 1934, the Toledo Auto-lite workers, the San Francisco longshore general strike, and the Trotskyist-led Teamster strikes in Minneapolis.

Yet, some groups of workers need this outside support, associative power, far more than other groups. So, textile workers, a low skill (easily replaceable) group in a moveable, low capital, cheap start-up industry (today we see textile mills moving from the US to China to even cheaper pastures), could not succeed without mobilizing powerful allies. Textile workers in Alabama, supported by a strong labor movement led by the coal miners, were more successful than in the rest of the South. Mainstream labor leaders did not understand this. They distanced themselves from potential allies. They thought they could convince textile company owners that they would benefit from "responsible" unions. This was especially true of Sidney Hillman, the leader of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and the head of the 1937 drive to organize the textile industry. He downplayed organizing workers and gaining allies in support of organizing drives, at first appealing to the non-existent "cooperative mill owners" who would embrace unions as partners in promoting productivity. He then tried to rely on his friends in the Roosevelt administration help, all to no avail.

The CIO "center" refused to acknowledge how associative power was crucial to successful textile worker organizing the world over. In India, textile workers in Bombay, the early center of the industry, had success when they were allied with the Independence movement. When the Indian Congress Party, after independence, made its peace with Indian capitalists, and undermined radical textile unions, textile workers had little leverage. In South Korea, despite the heroic struggles in the 1970s of brave, militant, female textile workers, they were only successful in their organizing in the 1980s when they were allied with the emerging student movement and workers in heavy industry.

In the end, Operation Dixie was a primer on how not to organize. It was controlled by the most bureaucratic of the right-wingers (their own term) in the CIO national office. They chose textile as their focus, probably a mistake. They eschewed allies. They first tried the Gompersque approach of trying to sweet talk the employers. They groveled before the most racist of Southern politicians, often alienating pro-union constituencies in the South, especially Black workers. Relying on "public relations" rather than substance, they chose inexperienced, Southern-born, male veterans as organizers (thinking incorrectly that this would blunt anti-communist attacks), eliminated leftists (who had been the most successful Southern organizers), and appointed virtually no women to organize an industry that had a high percentage of female workers.

The Communist Party (CP) was the most important socialist organization active in the CIO in this period. What was their strategy for organizing in the South? Why were they unable to pose an alternative to the "center" leadership of the CIO?

The CP especially in the 1930s played a heroic role in the South. First, they unequivocally championed the rights of Black workers, even when African-Americans were a small minority of the workforce. In Gastonia, North Carolina in 1929, they led a famous union drive, placing equality for Blacks as a central demand, even though the main plant was virtually all white. In 1931, in Harlan County, Kentucky, under murderously repressive conditions, they refused to allow the struggle to proceed until white workers agreed to interracial dining in soup kitchens. In contrast to virtually all other left groups, they pushed demands for equality in every venue in which they were active—meat packing industry, farm equipment, auto, and many others. They promoted Black leadership in numerous unions where they held leadership positions—longshore in San Francisco, farm equipment in Louisville, Mine Mill in Alabama, and nationally among seamen in the National Maritime Union—and elected a Black female executive board member in the Food and Tobacco Workers of America (FTA). They used broad associative power to gain support for union organizing drives in a variety of industries, including the oil industry, largely located in the South. In steel, they provided the crucial organizers throughout the industry, as I document in my book, including the majority of African-American organizers.

Yet, they lost significant influence, eventually capitulating to the racist, and class-collaborationist leaders of the CIO, which in the end did not protect them. In short, they were not very good in engaging in united front tactics. During the sectarian “third period” of 1928-1933, whose complexities I discuss in detail in the book, they often unnecessarily alienated potential allies and destroyed promising alliances. Even so, their radical dynamism enabled them to grow much more quickly than the Socialist Party and other left groups, suggesting their potential for even greater growth. After 1935, their politics began to shift, largely under directives from Moscow. By 1937, with the turn to the Popular Front at least at the national level, they sycophantically bowed and scraped before liberals and reactionaries. They changed from being critics of the New Deal, to apologizing for Roosevelt’s failure to oppose the fascists in the civil war in Spain and his unwillingness to support anti-lynching legislation in the U.S. Within the labor movement, they gave up all semblance of independence, subordinating themselves to the bidding of mainstream CIO leaders. Contrary to the liberal myths that the CP often secretly attempted to take over unions where they had little support, the national leadership of the party undermined the support of popular left-wing cadre who enjoyed majority support. This was most disastrous in the auto workers’ union (UAW) where the CP leaders (at the bidding of Murray, Lewis, and other mainstream CIO leaders) prevented the popular Wyndham Mortimer-led faction from establishing their leadership of the union in both 1936 and 1939. This paved the way for the authoritarian, racially obtuse Reuther group, much lauded in liberal hagiography, to take over the UAW. There is much debate, of course, about the degree to which the Popular Front strategy was supported by rank and file CP members. Some argue that they were happy to be in the mainstream of a broader popular movement, which led to a flourishing of left-wing cultural activity. While there may be a grain of truth to these claims, I argue that the strategy ultimately led to disaster.

How did the failure to organize Southern workers in the 1930s and 1940s shape US politics in the rest of the 20th and 21st centuries? What political and strategic lessons does this history provide socialists and radicals today?

The failure to organize the South during the 1930s and 1940s turned out to determine the fate of American politics and society from the post-World War II period, up to the present. I argue that the possibilities for organizing were manifold and not at all predetermined, contrary to most scholarship. The strategies of both the mainstream CIO leaders and the CP ultimately contributed to this failure.

In places where interracial, especially left-led, unionism was strong, unions proceeded to engage in labor-based civil rights activities which were often successful, and not easily defeated by local reactionaries. This phenomenon existed in isolated venues around the country, suggesting the

potential for labor-based civil rights activity on a wider scale.

Yet, the failures of interracial unionism, including the failure to organize the over 300,000 strong woodworkers, left a vacuum in the South. When the civil rights movement emerged in full force in the 1960s, there was little union support, especially for the most militant forms of activity. Individual anti-racist whites were easily isolated and repressed, both economically and by violence, which would have been less likely to be effective against organized workers. This situation fueled the so-called white backlash, leading to unchallenged white resistance. I trace the attempts by the Republican Party to appeal to racism to win whites in the South to the GOP, beginning with Barry Goldwater in 1964. The Republican openly embraced the “Southern Strategy” (to which the Democrats were not immune) formulated by Nixon and his chief aide Kevin Phillips, after the strong performance of racist Alabama Governor, George Wallace, in the 1964 and 1968 Presidential elections. This strategy continues with the now-rehabilitated Ronald Reagan, who campaigned against “crime in the street” and “welfare queens,” and began his 1984 reelection campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, the site of the 1964 brutal murders of civil rights martyrs, James Cheney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman. It continued with the (also rehabilitated) Bush I’s racist 1988 Willie Horton ads. Put simply there is a straight line from earlier Republican attempts to appeal to white racism, to the open racist, misogynist, anti-immigrant, egocentric Donald Trump—he is no anomaly in the post-war period.

The lessons for socialists and radicals today are manifold. First, we must build mass movements independently of capitalist parties and politicians, including even those connected to the so-called left-wing of the Democratic Party. At the same time, we must have an understanding of how to engage in united front activity with various groups with which we share limited goals. Second, the issues of confronting white supremacy in all its various forms, and the subordination of women, and other excluded groups, both domestically and internationally, are a prerequisite for solidaristic struggle, and for the labor movement to become a “tribune of the people.” Third, there are many issues of how to organize effectively, including understanding the structural power that various groups of workers may have, and how to mobilize effective supportive and associative power. This list is not exhaustive and can be amplified in further discussion. We need to learn from our defeats and failures. As Che Guevara used to say, *Hasta la victoria siempre!*

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