

CIVIL RIGHTS UNIONISM; TOBACCO WORKERS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY IN THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY SOUTH

Robert Rodgers Korstad, University of North Carolina Press, 2003

Reviewed by Clyde Appleton

I begin this review on a personal note. I lived in North Carolina for 22 years, and I heard wonderful stories about FTA Local 22 from my friends W. G. and Eleanore Binkley, two unforgettable comrades who are remembered with deep gratitude and affection. I rejoiced when I read the author's altogether positive assessments of Eleanore's competence and commitment as educational director of Local 22.

Duke University Professor Korstad's book begins: "Civil Rights Unionism tells the story of a workingclass-led, union-based civil rights movement that tried to change the arc of American history in the years surrounding World War II." The book's dynamic and vibrant core is its chronicle of Local 22 of the FTA:

Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers of America-CIO, and that local union's heroic confrontation with the racial capitalism represented by the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company in Winston-Salem, North Carolina during the seven years from 1943 to 1950. 10,000 tobacco manufacturing workers, 2/3 of them African Americans and more than half women, took on an often brutal power structure and

achieved some victories that can never be reversed. It was an impressive alliance that took up this fight, including large sectors of the African American community in Winston-Salem: churches, the NAACP, other civic organizations, Democratic Party formations in the Black community, and it most definitely included the Communist Party. The selfless contributions of Communists to the struggles in Winston-Salem are given careful attention by the author. Many Local 22 members were, at the same time, active and dedicated union members, active and dedicated Communist Party members, and active and dedicated members of their churches. There was no contradiction. Wasn't that a time!

The militant struggles so vividly described in this book didn't happen in a vacuum. They arose out of causes and conditions, and Professor Korstad provides insights into the roots of the conflict between Local 22 and RJR by illuminating the antecedents of both protagonists: (1) the progressive fusion politics in Winston-Salem that saw an alliance of Black voters, workers, Populists and the Republican Party in the 1890s, and (2) the alliance of planters and industrialists, RJR being a principal player, that swept the Democratic Party into power in 1898. This victory for reaction brought about the near-total disenfranchisement of African Americans and the institution of Jim Crow laws that effectively insured the triumph of white supremacy for another half-century.

I found this book to be exemplary, being both scholarly and partisan. Korstad's research and writing exhibits all the standards of rigorous scholarship. It is also partisan in that it is written from the perspective of African American workers at the RJR Company. More than 100 oral history interviews were conducted, most of the interviewees being RJR workers. Working class leaders like Robert Black come alive in these pages, and we can only be grateful that the name and the words of Robert Black and the names and words of other working class heroes are recorded in this outstanding book.

Especially noteworthy was the leadership of African American women in Local 22. The first chapter, aptly titled "Those Who Were Not Afraid" relates the riveting events of June 17, 1943. Theodosia Simpson, a young stemming machine operator, in an act of deep sympathy and solidarity with a fellow worker-an older woman who was treated with demeaning disrespect by her boss, lit the spark that resulted in a work stoppage the next day. That sit-down strike set off a chain of events that culminated in a union contract at RJR in less than a year. Throughout the book, right up to the final chapter "Trust the Bridge That Carried Us Over," one sees strong, dedicated and courageous women. That final chapter tells the sordid story of the well-orchestrated demise of Local 22 that coincided with the tragic death of Moranda Smith, remarkable Local 22 militant, dedicated Communist, and the first Black woman to serve on the executive board of an international union.

Local 22, with strong and deep roots in the community, was never concerned only with wages and working

conditions. It was the very opposite of parochial. Leaders and members of the local union saw their immediate struggles at RJR Company as integrally related to the whole of their lives in the community. Two of the chapter titles are indicative of the breadth and depth of Local 22's involvement. The title of Chapter 10 is "There Was Nothing in the City That Didn't Concern the Tobacco Union," and the title of Chapter 11 proclaims that "It Wasn't Just Wages We Wanted, but Freedom." Korstad expresses it well when he writes that Local 22 was both a trade union and a "laboratory of participatory democracy."

Red-baited out of existence in 1950, Local 22 left a legacy of militant struggle with deep roots in the community and an unbreakable commitment to the fight against the class, race and gender divisions that the ruling class uses in its callous and persistent attempts to keep workers separated and weak. Yes, there were Company collaborators and informers and, at the end, overwhelming pressures that led to some sellouts and betrayals. Overall, however, the unity of the workers at RJR was remarkably solid and this unity lies at the heart of Korstad's book.

I close this review on another personal note. I was a music teacher for 38 years, and I have a keen interest in the use of music in people's struggles. I was delighted with the many references in the book that affirm the power of music. Local 22 was a singing union. African American women sang in the plant as they worked. There was singing at union meetings, in union organizing campaigns, and on picket lines. Local 22 also gained the attention, respect and support of musicians of national and international reputation, most notably Paul Robeson. A fitting conclusion to this excellent and highly recommended book is this excerpt from the words Robeson spoke at Moranda Smith's funeral at Grolier AME Zion Church in Winston-Salem:
"We must dedicate ourselves in the struggle as she did--to see that this will be a bounteous, peaceful world in which all people can walk in full human dignity:~