

Civil Rights Unionism:

Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South

Robert Rodgers Korstad

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This landmark work powerfully renders the inspiring and tragic story of black workers in the tobacco industry in North Carolina. Through painstaking research, Robert Korstad offers many insights into how history and government actions shape the terrain on which working-class movements are built, sometimes aiding and sometimes undermining them. But at the book's core is a stirring narrative of how workers affected their destinies through their own actions.

RJ Reynolds, of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the largest manufacturer of tobacco in the world in the 1940s, at the time employed some twelve thousand workers, two-thirds of them black and about one-half of them women. Korstad's genius is his ability to take us directly into the world of these workers, to explain their experiences, their expansive thinking about social justice, their political goals, and their methods of workplace and community organizing. They sought not just improved wages and working conditions but a different kind of world free of racism and gender and class oppression. Korstad makes their struggles palpable through a narrative based in large part on oral histories he has collected.

The story opens with black women setting off a spontaneous 1943 strike against intolerable conditions during speeded-up wartime production and places us squarely in the middle of a social movement erupting in the factories. Korstad's description of this event is typical of the book's narrative, transporting the reader back through time to see, hear, and feel the black working-class experience. He shows how angry, inspired, and organized black workers drew on deep traditions of struggle going back to slavery and how, through an accretion of experimentation, analysis, and social learning, they defined their own issues and unionized one of the largest and most antiunion companies in the South.

Winston-Salem's ruling class of manufacturers, bankers, media owners, and commercial capitalists had seized political control through the 1898 "white supremacy" campaign across the state that split an interracial electoral coalition for greater economic democracy. Two black workers in Winston-Salem had been elected to the board of aldermen, but "white supremacy" removed them along with "the danger of the rule of Negroes and the lower classes of whites," according to the state's press (53). White elites until the 1940s maintained their rule by keeping poor blacks and whites divided, fearful, and unorganized. Korstad seems to have ransacked every available source to paint an intimate portrait of the class hierarchy, political disfranchisement, and daily violence of segregation. But he also clearly attaches segregation's political economy to the larger system of "racial capitalism" in the United States, allowing us to see how the "sexualized racism" (11) and exploitation black workers faced in Winston-Salem fit into the larger society.

Black workers confronted their oppression and challenged this entire edifice when they built Local 22 of the Food and Tobacco Workers of America (FTA), as part of a leftist international with one of the most diverse memberships in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Winston-Salem had perhaps the most concentrated and organized

black working class of any southern city, and Local 22 energized an extraordinarily powerful multiclass movement with a base in black churches and social organizations as well as the workplace. Black worker organizing not only unionized RJ Reynolds but also elected a black alderman in 1947 for the first time since the white supremacy campaign of 1898. This worker-based movement created an impressively expansive vision for justice with a locally rooted politics that also drew on the social-democratic politics of the New Deal and the 1948 Progressive Party. This Was a grassroots movement in the black community guided by an interracial cadre of CIA trade union leftists.

Korstad clearly documents the agency of black workers in creating an innovative, class-conscious antiracism within the industrial union movement, but he does not romanticize it. He stresses that civil rights unionism became possible because of the particular historical context of the 1940s. New Deal laws and wartime agencies created specific mechanisms for black workers to exercise a new kind of rights consciousness, supported by an interracial Popular Front of New Deal intellectuals and political activists in the South. His evenhanded discussion of the Communist Party's strategic role in popularizing antiracism and organizing the black working class refutes the anti-Communist narrative that remains so popular in explaining the past. Korstad never resorts to generalization, but rather carefully analyzes every historical element that expanded or undermined the workers' movement.

The bipartisan postwar repression of Republicans and Democrats proved truly disastrous for black workers and civil rights advocates. At a time when "red" supplemented 'nigger' as the rallying cry of those who sought to maintain the racial status quo" (417), business and political leaders in Winston-Salem and the nation used any weapon they could find to defeat labor-based movements for change. This is a long and exhaustive book, yet there is actually more to say about how the House Un-American Activities Committee and other government agencies wrecked constitutional and worker rights in WinstonSalem by undermining the exercise of black civil rights and free speech and association between workers.

Perhaps the most revolting, if understated, part of Korstad 's history is the role of the CIA in destroying Local 22. Union and black middle-class leaders, including the black alderman Local 22 had helped elect, joined with employers, the media, and the state using lies, fear, and economic coercion to destroy perhaps the most important CIA union representing women and minority workers in the South. Reynolds and other tobacco workers to this day live in a nonunion environment as a result. This book's documentation of how reactionary forces can derail powerful movements for social change such as those that emerged at the end of World War II makes especially painful reading.

It almost seems churlish to ask for more from such a lengthy book so sensitively written and meticulously detailed, yet I wish there had been one more chapter, on the union's defeat. White workers at RJ Reynolds produced the margin of "no union" votes to defeat Local 22 in a disputed 1950 election (the union would have won with only fifty more white votes [413]), while blacks largely ignored the red-baiting attacks against it. Previously, enough whites had voted for Local 22 to keep it strong, and a number of exceptionally principled white leftist organizers, including Ed McCrea and Korstad's father, Karl, played a crucial role in building it. Despite antiunion and anti-Communist media propaganda, sexualized racism, and blatant company intimidation and firings, a degree of white support helped make this an interracial, black-led union. The defeat of Local 22 tragically under-

mined the emerging civil rights struggle in the 1950s and 1960s and placed white workers in opposition to a grassroots agenda for economic justice and civil rights.

Korstad is correct to focus on black workers as the protagonists and to blame the racism of the company and the town's white ruling elites for the union's destruction. "White workers' racial identities and attitudes ... are not the focus of this book, in part because I do not see them as the primary cause of the movement's defeat" (II). Yet it was their votes that defeated the union. Korstad did find some white workers who were willing to be interviewed, and their explanations of why they were such ambivalent allies for a majority-black union give this story even greater pathos. While Korstad has chosen not to focus on them, his book implicitly challenges us to do more to research white workers in ways that meet the high standard of analysis Korstad has set.

Civil Rights Unionism challenges historians to do more and to dig deeper. We have been moving the historiography of the civil rights movement back in time before the 1950s and 1960s, to reconnect the black freedom movement to black workers and labor organizing in ways that cold war scholarship almost obliterated. This book more than perhaps any other shows just how profound those connections could be. "Local 22 was the workers' invention, their vehicle, the product of their sentiments and aspirations" (399), says Korstad. Page by page, he proves it. Korstad's detailed research and deft analysis reveals the tremendous significance of this movement, and not only is the story itself remarkable, but his telling of it is extraordinary. Korstad shows that the workers' struggles were not only about the right to unionize and gain citizenship rights and decent conditions at work but also about opposing the daily inequities of America's racial capitalism and creating a more just and democratic society.

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