

1. Jacqueline Jones, *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor* (New York: Norton, 1998), 19.
2. August Wilson, *Two Trains Running* (New York: Plume, 1992), 38.
3. August Wilson, *Jitney* (New York: Overlook Press, 2001), 57.
4. *Ibid.*, 58.
5. Margaret Booker, *Lillian Hellman and August Wilson: Dramatizing a New American Identity* (New York: Lang, 2003), 42.
6. August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (New York: Plume, 1981), xv.
7. *Ibid.*, 79.
8. August Wilson, *Fences* (New York: New American Library, 1986), 45.

Short but Sweet: The Brave Life of Local 22

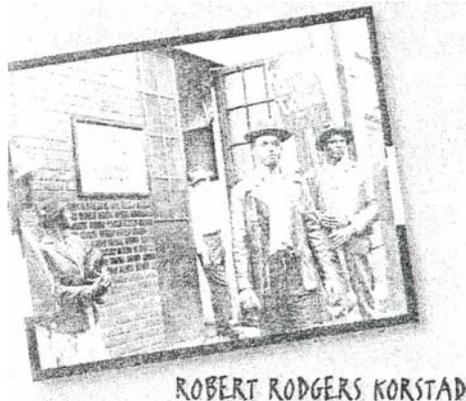
By Bruce Nelson

Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South

By Robert Rodgers Korstad

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Robert Korstad's *Civil Rights Unionism* tells the story of the rise and fall of Local 22 of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers of America (FT A) in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, from its founding in 1943 to its demise seven years later. But the book is not, or not just, a community study. Although the author demonstrates an exceptional grasp of the intricacies and dynamics of Winston-Salem's black community, he also displays a mastery of the big picture—the long-term development of "racial capitalism," the evolution and metamorphosis of white supremacy, the achievements and limitations of the New Deal, the industrial union movement, and the Popular Front of the



1930s and 1940s.

Despite its short life, Local 22 was arguably one of the most innovative and exemplary trade union organizations in twentieth-century America. At the heart of the union were thousands of black women who had endured decades of super-exploitation at the hands of their employer. Their rebellion against that regime provided the catalyst out of which Local 22 was born. Following a sit-down strike in June 1943, tobacco workers won union recognition and, aided by sympathetic

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federal intervention, a collective bargaining agreement that compelled Reynolds to "adhere to national standards" (211). Thereafter, the union continued to fight not only to better the wages and conditions of its members, but to democratize the shop floor and the larger society in which FT A members lived. This meant attacking Jim (row, fighting for the right to vote, and, through educational and cultural activities, honing the workers' class sensibilities and building an active sense of pride in the struggles of black people in the United States and throughout the African diaspora.

Korstad traces Local 22's trajectory with eloquence, passion, and insight. His book is a vitally important contribution to the fields of labor and African American history; it is also an important, if sometimes problematic, intervention in the often bitter debate about the role that class and race have played in shaping the consciousness (in today's term, the multiple identities) of American workers. Above all, perhaps, it is a labor of love—a book that has its roots in the family experience of its author. Robert Korstad's father Karl was the FTA's Southeast regional director after World War II; he played an active role in Winston-Salem in 1949 during the union's last great battle for survival. One of the book's chief protagonists, Local 22 activist and official Robert "(hick" Black, was not only a political associate and friend of the Korstad family, he was also a mentor who taught the author important lessons

about "how to cope with injustice, and, most important, how to live with dignity and decency in an imperfect world" (525).

Winston-Salem was (and still is) the home of R. J. Reynolds (RJR), whose local manufacturing complex was the largest producer of tobacco products in the world. In 1940, it employed 10,000 workers, two-thirds of whom were black, and more than half of whom were female. Black women were concentrated in the stemmeries, where they worked at machines that separated the stem from the tobacco leaf. The heat in the stemmeries was often unbearable; dust was omnipresent; and the foremen (all of them white) presided over a regime that combined super-exploitation with the threat and often the reality of sexual aggression. RJR had successfully resisted unionization during the 1930s and had managed to offset reform legislation such as the Fair Labor Standards Act by speeding up and mechanizing the production process. But in the context of the soaring rhetoric that accompanied the New Deal and World War II, black workers were becoming increasingly agitated at the contradiction between the reality of their lives and the language of democracy and freedom.

According to Korstad, black women were especially "well positioned to shape the workers' movement of the 1940s in their own image," and "they gave the union its distinctive breadth and community orientation" (91). In

part, their activism flowed from a "vibrant social world" and "intricate urban community" that had evolved behind the veil of segregation; a world that "provided innumerable avenues for developing organization and leadership skills" (90). But the prominence of black and female leadership also reflected the fact that the FTA was a Left-led union. At the national level, its president and many of its key officials were members of the Communist Party (CP). They had a profound influence on the political development of Local 22's leaders, many of whom became Party members themselves. Korstad insists, however, that Local 22 was essentially a "local movement" forged and led by "local people" (1). Even at the height of CP influence, he argues, "Party interests and orthodoxy usually took a back seat to the needs of the union and the culture of the black working class" (274).

Nonetheless, the CP presence in Winston-Salem was remarkable. The *Daily Worker* was very much in evidence; indeed, one shop steward apparently sold 200 copies of the paper in his department. The Party and its Popular Front allies arranged for Left cultural icons such as Paul Robeson and Woody Guthrie to perform before mass audiences in Winston-Salem. Moreover, Local 22 developed a wide array of educational activities that included a union library stocked with novels, poetry, biographies, and labor and African American history.

In other words, Local 22 was a different kind of union that helped to launch a different kind of civil rights movement. Korstad calls it "a working-class-led, union-based civil rights

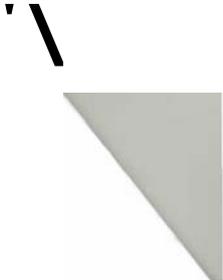
movement that tried to change the arc of American history" (1). The union worked closely with—indeed, transformed—the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored

People (NAACP), supported a New Deal Democratic Congressman in a bitter battle to stave off the forces of political reaction after World War II, and succeeded in electing a black minister to Winston-Salem's Board of Aldermen in 1947 (the first time since the end of the nineteenth century that an African American had defeated a white candidate in the South). In the case of the NAACP, its membership in Winston-Salem grew from 11 in 1941 to 1,918 in 1946. Most of the new members were tobacco workers and union members. Not only that, but the Left-leaning leadership of Local 22 merged issues of civil rights with a social-democratic economic and political program that envisioned a radical democratization of American society. It was a civil rights agenda that differed significantly from that of the movement that flourished from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s.

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But anticommunism derailed it and destroyed Local 22 as well.

The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 created the legal opening that RJR needed to undermine Local 22. When the national leadership of the FTA refused to sign Taft-Hartley's anti-Communist affidavits, the union forfeited its right to use the services of the National Labor Relations Board. RJR then announced that it would no



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longer recognize or bargain with Local 22, and it asked the NLRB to sanction a decertification election. The AFL entered the fray; so did the Cia, supporting the attempt by a small, mainly black affiliate of "red caps" at railway stations and airports to supplant the FTA (whose leaders eventually signed the Taft-Hartley affidavits, thus winning a place on the ballot in Local 22's final conflict). Considering the forces that were arrayed against it, at a time of anti-Communist hysteria, Local 22 came amazingly close to winning the final NLRB election. It demolished its AFL and cia competitors, winning 1,200 more votes than both of them combined. In the run-off against the "no union" alternative in early 1950, the FTA lost by a total of 66 votes, after the NLRB awarded a substantial percentage of the challenged ballots to "no union."

What role did white workers play in the rise and fall of Local 22? In a nutshell: a small part in the union's emer-

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gence but a major role in its demise. Whites made up about a third of the RJR workforce in 1940; they were, of course, concentrated in the cleaner, higher paying, and more skilled jobs, and were almost entirely separated

from their black counterparts in the plant. After Local 22's victory in 1943, the company set out to increase the number of white workers as a way to weaken the union. By 1950, partly as a result of mechanization and massive layoffs in the stemmeries, they made up about half the Reynolds workforce; and it's fair to conclude that they constituted the overwhelming majority of "no union" votes in the final NLRB election, just as blacks continued to provide the great bulk of Local 22's members and supporters.

Korstad acknowledges that "several hundred" (1) whites belonged to the union, a pitifully small number given their percentage of the workforce. But it was not for lack of trying. Especially after World War II, the union made a sustained effort to organize white workers, even allowing whites to use the union hall for dances and other social activities from which black members of Local 22 were largely excluded. But there was something more fundamental. Local 22 was responsible for dramatic improvements in the wages and conditions of black workers (indeed, of all workers) at RJR. But its leaders were reluctant to challenge the structural foundations of white privilege in the allocation of jobs in the plant. To have done so, Korstad acknowledges, would have "doom[ed] any hope of attracting white workers to the union" (173). It was the same with seniority. Blacks had seniority only within their departments.

This effectively prevented them from moving to more desirable locations in the occupational hierarchy and made them more vulnerable to layoffs, since it was the least skilled jobs that were most easily mechanized.

"The possibility of building an interracial union might be foreclosed," Korstad admits, "if white workers saw the union as a direct threat to their interests" (20S).

Thus, a radical, avowedly interracial union project came up against the hard reality that white workers would be likely to embrace the FTA only if it deferred to the deeply entrenched "wages of whiteness" on the shop floor. And whites refused, even then, to join Local 22, because it was, mainly, a "black-led organization" serving a constituency that was overwhelmingly black, and reflecting in important ways the distinctive culture of African Americans. Sadly, Korstad acknowledges, the history of Local 22 is "yet another example of the deep-seated unwillingness of whites to participate in a black-led organization" (346).

But he also argues that the "racial identities and attitudes" of white workers were not a "prim"ary cause" of Local 22's defeat (11). Perhaps not, but they played an indispensable role in that defeat. Korstad is too sophisticated a historian to attribute the white workers' stance to "false consciousness," but he is determined to preserve the priority of class over race in explaining the rise and fall of Local 22 in Winston-Salem. However, from this reviewer's perspective, the outlook and

activity of white workers demonstrates that they were indeed defending real caste privileges-privileges that were material as well as psychological.

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Ideally, perhaps, white workers' "objective interests" should have compelled them to join black workers in fighting not only for a new deal at RJR, but for a radically democratic economic and political agenda in the larger society. Practically speaking, however, they lived within the limits of what they perceived as possible, and desirable, in their own here and now. That meant defending the wages of whiteness, in and beyond the workplace. More than that, it meant maintaining the necessary physical and psychological distance between themselves and a people over against whom they had defined themselves for generations. It would appear that Local 22's "crime" was not that it was "Red," but rather that it was "black."

To disagree with Korstad, however, is not to demean the magnitude of his achievement. *Civil Rights Unionism* is an important book; it tells a great story with sophistication and verve, and it succeeds in its objective of recovering and highlighting the lives of extraordinary "ordinary people" who, until now, have remained hidden from history.