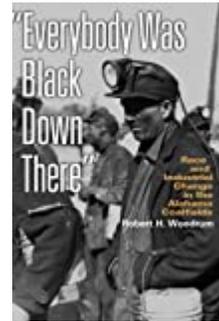




Robert H. Woodrum. *"Everybody Was Black down There:" Race and Industrial Change in the Alabama Coalfields.* Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2007. xiv + 304 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-2879-9.



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Understanding Race, Class, and Industrial Change in Southern Coal Mining

In January 2006, a coal-mine explosion in Sago, West Virginia, trapped thirteen miners. The progress of rescue operations riveted the nation for days and ended with only one of the miners surviving. This was the deadliest mine disaster in the United States since an explosion in late September 2001 took the lives of thirteen miners in Brookwood, Alabama. Although the rapid progression of domestic and international events in the weeks following the terrorist attacks of September 11 pushed the Brookwood tragedy to the margins of national media coverage, it remained in the forefront of Robert Woodrum's mind as he wrote *"Everybody Was Black down There:" Race and Industrial Change in the Alabama Coalfields.* Woodrum opens and closes his narrative about Alabama's coal mining industry from the New Deal to the close of the twentieth century with personal insights about the Brookwood disaster. In the pages between, he adeptly analyzes the intersections of race, class, labor policy, technological change, and globalization in what has historically been not only one of the most dangerous industries in the United States, but also one of the most studied.

On the surface Woodrum tells a familiar story. Coal

mining, a sick industry in the 1920s that is further undermined by the Great Depression, experiences a short-term revival during World War II before a decline sets in at mid-century and gathers speed as the century ends. Mines curtail output or close completely as oil, gas, diesel, and hydroelectric power replace coal as a fuel source, while new mining techniques and mechanization eliminate jobs. Critics of organized labor heap blame on the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) for raising wages, driving up costs with demands for stringent safety standards, and including other provisions in union contracts that make Alabama coal uncompetitive in regional and national markets. Global coal imports at the end of the century squeeze the Alabama industry further. Pressure to cut costs undermines safety standards, and fly-by-night mine operators ignore wage, seniority, healthcare, and pension provisions in union agreements. Miners all the while experience mass layoffs and struggle to find other work, mining communities are economically devastated, UMWA membership losses are substantial, and the union can do little for the hard-hit miners. Alabama coal miners at the turn of the century, Woodrum concludes, "found themselves caught up in a system of capi-

tal mobility that allowed coal companies and consumers to look outside the region and country to satisfy their demands” (p. 215).

By placing race at the center of his analysis, however, Woodrum adds a new twist to the story of job loss, community abandonment, and deindustrialization. Moreover, his focus on the decline of a southern industry with a strong, militant union tradition contributes to an emerging literature on the modern South that eschews the analytical framework of regional exceptionalism, and instead highlights the ways in which economic change and patterns of unionism in the region are more akin to the Rust Belt North than the Sun Belt South. Drawing these various approaches together, Woodrum argues convincingly that the UMWA’s attempts during the final decades of the twentieth century to maintain jobs, benefits, and safety standards in the mines in the face of global competition were rooted in choices, especially relating to race, made by the union many years before. Woodrum bases his study on an impressive array of manuscript and archival sources, company and union records, government documents, interviews, and oral histories. What emerges is a thought-provoking work worthy of a wide audience.

Woodrum explores an above ground/below ground split in Alabama’s coalfields, a divide he utilizes to underpin his fresh look at the old debate about the extent and consequences of white working-class racism. The biracial workforce of the southern coal mining industry in the early twentieth century set it apart from other southern industries. In the steel and iron industries, whites held most skilled and semi-skilled jobs, and in textiles the workforce was nearly all white until late in the twentieth century. The strong union presence in southern coalfields, too, set the industry apart from other major industries in the region that in some cases remained open shop strongholds through much of the twentieth century. In Alabama’s coalfields, black miners outnumbered their white counterparts by the 1930s, and were integral in reviving the UMWA, which had been moribund in the state since a failed 1921 strike. While segregated mining camps were the norm above ground, black and white miners produced coal in a cooperative underground milieu. Here, commonalities of working underground in a dangerous occupation forged bonds of solidarity among them, and often found an institutional outlet in the biracial unionism of the UMWA.

Even though the men—black and white—who labored in the coalfields of Alabama’s Birmingham District were

miners and had an identity as such, how they defined themselves and their interests changed depending on spatial, social, and temporal context. Identity formation and racial cooperation, Woodrum argues, did not occur in a vacuum and did not remain static over time. While the nature of the job may have muted some racial differences and made everybody “black down there,” this was not necessarily so above ground in the mining camps, the union hall, or even in the man-cars that transported the miners between the surface and their underground workplaces. Here, the color line regularly remained entrenched. Interracial cooperation and the UMWA’s race-related policies were therefore ultimately “circumscribed by the wider world of the Birmingham District” (p. 6).

Woodrum presents a complex picture of race, class, and working-class identity, wherein interracial solidarity among the rank and file and the union’s commitment to a progressive social agenda ebbed and flowed. Through the Depression years of the 1930s and the early years of World War II, UMWA leaders publicly voiced a commitment to using the union as a vehicle for economic and social advancement for both its white and black members. UMWA membership provided black miners with a mechanism to address on-the-job grievances and arbitrary treatment by white supervisors, as well as leadership opportunities within union locals and in the national union bureaucracy. Still, in Alabama where black miners outnumbered whites, the union pursued a “gradualist” approach to race relations and did not directly confront white supremacy within its own ranks or in the broader society. Whites typically served in the top positions of local unions and voluntary separation remained the norm at integrated union meetings. “You had a certain liberalism because we were all accepted as union,” recalled one black miner quoted by Woodrum, “not accepted as union brothers, but as union members” (p. 114).

By the end of World War II and into the racially charged decades of the 1950s and 1960s, however, the UMWA remained largely silent on issues of race both above and below ground. At a time when the social and political terrains of the South began the most profound shifts since Reconstruction, the UMWA’s commitment to biracialism and its black membership diminished significantly. Woodrum explores the thorny issue of Ku Klux Klan membership as an example. Rather than risk a revolt among its southern white rank and file by enforcing the UMWA’s prohibition against membership in the Klan, the union’s national leadership left it up to Alabama’s leaders to determine policy on this issue. For the union’s white leaders, as well as many of its white rank and file,

race appears to have trumped class in the name of institutional stability.

Below ground, the UMWA's commitment to the preservation of the union and union jobs also trumped a commitment to its black members. As the demand for coal dropped and the industry's postwar contraction became increasingly acute in the five years following World War II, the union focused its efforts not only on saving jobs, but also on creating a pension and healthcare fund for its members. In 1950, the UMWA forged a historic agreement with coal operators establishing such a fund, which was financed by a tax levied on mine output. In return for de facto control over the fund and in the hopes of boosting production so that more coal could be taxed for the pension and healthcare fund, the UMWA agreed to give a free hand to coal operators' efforts to modernize operations, introduce new technologies, and make the industry more competitive. But as Woodrum explains, in practice this translated to a profound whitening of the mining workforce. By 1960, 70 percent of black miners in Alabama had lost their jobs. Management retained its prerogatives over hiring and promotion, and continued the traditional practice of reserving for whites jobs requiring the operation of machines. White rank-and-file coal miners for their part balked at UMWA attempts to

secure traditionally white-held positions for black members, and the union acquiesced to the status quo. Within the context of deindustrialization and potential job loss, race again mitigated a wider class-based solidarity.

By the 1970s, when African Americans constituted only 11 percent of Alabama's coal miners, the UMWA had become, like many "old" industrial unions, conservative and member-centered. The long-term implications of the UMWA's race-related policies, protectionist rhetoric, and decisions to close ranks in order to protect the jobs of its mostly white rank and file were thrown into high relief when the union attempted to boycott the importation of coal from South Africa. The union found itself unable to sustain meaningful inter-union cooperation with Mobile's longshoremen whose job it was to unload the coal at port, or to forge coalitions with activists opposed to issues ranging from apartheid, to environmental degradation, to poor working conditions in the global mining industry. Here Woodrum points to lessons to be learned about both the past and present. His study is therefore not only an important read for those seeking a better understanding of race and industrial change in the past, but also for workers, unions, and community activists seeking a way forward in the modern era of global production and trade.

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