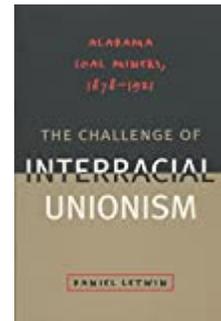




Daniel Letwin. *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xii + 289 pp. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4678-0; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2377-4.



Reviewed by Brian Kelly (School of Modern History, Queen's University of Belfast)

Published on H-Labor (August, 1998)

Some thirty years ago, the late Herbert Gutman lit the fuse to an incendiary debate among labor historians when, while lamenting the “absence of detailed knowledge of the ‘local world’ inhabited by white and Negro workers” at the turn of the century, he projected that “any authoritative history of the United Mine Workers” would necessarily include both “grimly detailed pages about racial and ethnic quarrels” and evidence of an exceptional record of interracial cooperation and egalitarianism. Gutman’s critics, with former NAACP official Herbert Hill in the vanguard, charged him (posthumously) with embellishing the UMW’s record on race. Rejecting the “myth of the UMW’s benevolence towards the black worker,” Hill posited an ideological explanation of Gutman’s shortcomings: the “tendency to deny race as a crucial factor, to permit questions of class to subsume racial issues,” which he detected in Gutman’s work, were evidence of the lingering influence of “a romanticized ‘popular front’ leftism.”

More recent studies by Draper, Ignatiev, and McKiven have sought to extend Hill’s indictment to much of the “new” labor history.[1] For too long, scholarly debate over the complicated encounter between black and white workers remained trapped within the debilitating framework imposed by Hill. Were white workers and their unions devoutly egalitarian or hopelessly racist? That,

it seemed, was the question. From the beginning, however, scholars inspired by the new labor history rejected the very terms of the “debate” as too narrowly contrived and artificial. Neither Gutman nor his heirs defended the notion that black workers understood their predicament through strictly class, rather than racial terms. Nor has any serious scholar posited an uncomplicated collapse of racial antagonism in the face of increasing class conflict. The cramped parameters set by Hill, Stephen Brier objected early on, excluded the much more significant question of what transpired when “white [workers], whose attitudes if not their behavior towards blacks are on the whole racist, begin to shed racist beliefs and practices as they begin to participate in inter-racial organizations and actually see their fellow workers as active union supporters.” A more dynamic understanding of the interaction between race and class in American history, Brier and others argued—one which took account of the tension between racial and class identity in specific historical contexts—required a rejection of the mechanical approach espoused by Hill.

Daniel Letwin’s groundbreaking exploration of the ambiguities of working class interracialism in the Alabama coal mines showcases the advantages of a fresh approach to the race/class conundrum. Empirically rich, sensibly argued, and rigorously attentive to the shifting

perspectives of Birmingham district miners as they attempted to breach the color line in the industrializing South, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921* is the first full-length study of the remarkable persistence of interracial unionism in this seemingly unlikely setting. The rich complexity of the Alabama story has been hinted at previously—in scattered references in a handful of earlier studies, most ably by Ronald Lewis in his pathbreaking survey, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict, 1780-1980* (Lexington: 1987). But Letwin's much more ambitious effort brings to bear extensive primary research with a solid grasp of the larger context in which Birmingham interracialism evolved to produce a seminal study that ranks among the best of the new work on race and the labor movement.[2]

The interracial tradition owed its emergence at least partly to the fitful character of the Birmingham district's development in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The repeated failure of the district to deliver on its industrial promise, Letwin argues, elevated the importance of cheap production costs, the most important of which was its labor. From the beginning, coal operators employed a racially and ethnically mixed workforce: African American miners constituted a substantial presence from the outset, and thus "any notion among white miners of a racially defined territory had little chance to take root" (p. 77). Given the region's commitment to white supremacy, "explosive [racial] tensions lurked beneath the daily relations of black and white miners" (p. 38). Nevertheless, Letwin argues, "chronic, intense, and wide-ranging conflict with the operators over material conditions and power relations focused the miners' consciousness in ways that could submerge the divisive capacities of race" (p. 40).

Coalfield interracialism was not a static phenomenon, Letwin demonstrates, but a strategic response to the many-sided attacks on the "miners' freedom," and one which shifted over time, shaped in turn by the changing racial strategies of district operators, by the pressures of holding the ranks together in a society that brooked no transgressions against white supremacy, and by the complex racial and class outlook carried into the mines by workers themselves. Letwin notes the "pragmatic language that framed calls for interracialism" (p. 62) and suggests that while practical collaboration could occasionally spur exceptional breaches of Jim Crow racial protocol, and while miners of both races developed a keen "awareness that the color line functioned, indeed was deliberately used, at their expense" (p. 90), work-

ing class interracialism very often accommodated itself to, rather than directly challenged, Jim Crow.

Letwin's narrative chronicles the fortunes of interracial unionism through four successive periods: the years between the collapse of Reconstruction and the late 1880s, when the Greenback-Labor Party and the Knights of Labor in turn provided district miners with an arena for bi-racial collaboration and a vehicle for resisting the power of the operators; the Populist period, during which the operators resorted increasingly to an explicit divide-and-rule strategy, importing black strikebreakers to frustrate UMW efforts to establish a foothold in the district; the years between the turn of the century and the First World War, when a temporary truce between union miners and their employers gave way to conflict and the decimation of the union after 1908; and the wartime revival of interracial unionism which began in 1916 and culminated in a massive confrontation in the coalfields in 1920-21.

In the years before black Alabamans lost the franchise in 1901, state Democrats faced a number of independent electoral challenges in the mineral district. The local variant of Greenbackism was notable for the way that miners adapted the party's more abstract national program to immediate, local concerns: demands for abolition of the convict lease system, stricter enforcement of health and safety regulations in the mines, and protection against being cheated out of their wages all figured prominently in local campaigns. Also exceptional, by Alabama standards, was the willingness of white Greenbackers to work closely with their black counterparts, not in the spirit of "upcountry Republicanism," which "viewed blacks as pawns in their contest with the Black Belt elite," writes Letwin, but as "central actors": "interracial collaboration was a compelling imperative in the miners' challenge to the operators and to Bourbon rule" (p. 66).

Both the Greenbackers and the Knights of Labor defended black political rights at the height of their influence, Letwin writes, but the Bourbons' ability to spurn the Populist challenge led to an eclipsing of the potential for a labor-aligned electoral challenge and, notably, to the weakening of interracialism. Black Greenbackers had frequently complained that their white counterparts "could not bring themselves to break with the Democratic Party even as they urged blacks to stand by the Greenback ticket" (p. 63), and white labor paid dearly for its silence in the face of disfranchisement. Their reluctance to confront Jim Crow directly deprived white miners of their closest electoral allies, narrowing the possibilities of mounting an electoral challenge to white elites and leav-

ing white workers to choose between contending factions of a Democratic party fully committed to safeguarding the interests of their employers.

While Letwin has perhaps underestimated the operators' recognition of the benefits offered by a racially divided workforce in the district's formative period,[3] he is no doubt correct that their approach to the race question underwent a qualitative shift during the 1894 strike, when the "mass importation of black strikebreakers [became] a critical, perhaps pivotal, part of the operators' arsenal" (p. 116). The deliberate resort to racial provocation became a permanent feature of coalfield labor relations, a reflexive response to every subsequent challenge by the UMW. Letwin devotes considerable attention to the effect of this strategy within the ranks of the UMW, a potentially paralyzing development which the union weathered remarkably well. The union sought actively to "deflect the racial wedge" by "emphasizing the presence of white as well as black strikebreakers" and by distinguishing between "black 'practical miners,' who had sided overwhelmingly with the union," and "green hands" who had been shipped in without any knowledge of their role. Moreover, Letwin writes, the UMW "leaned over backwards to deny any suggestion that whites enjoyed a primary claim on work, at times even hesitating to urge the ouster of black strikebreakers lest it stoke racial divisions" (p. 93).

Despite its shrewd perception of the disruptive intent of divide-and-rule, however, and a sometimes exemplary discipline in the face of racial provocation, Letwin dispels any notion that the Alabama UMW was an oasis of racial equality sealed off from the larger society in which it operated. "White unionists," he writes, "contested the operators' manipulation of race from both within and outside the tradition of white supremacy" (p. 94). Resentment of the operators' attempts to displace white labor with black after the turn of the century was often articulated as an objection to their violation of white solidarity. Discussions of black strikebreaking frequently combined genuine sympathy for those being shipped in to scab with patronizing assertions about the need for white miners to "lift" black miners to manhood. Most notably, the UMW's consistent evasion of the nebulous charge of "social equality," a register both of white miners' "own real feelings and of the narrow breathing room available to any interracial movement in the Jim Crow era" attests to the combination of "self-preservation and genuine solidarity [that] gave shape to every dimension of District 20's racial practices" (p. 137).

The most impressive feature of *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism* is Letwin's persistence in reconstructing the racial perspectives which black and white miners carried into their joint struggles out of the cryptic, often contradictory, remnants of their thoughts that survive in the historical record. He does this with diligence and scrupulous evenhandedness, providing students of southern labor history with a rare glimpse into the "'local world' inhabited by white and Negro workers." While the narrative holds together well, and the central problems identified by Letwin are skillfully addressed, however, several of the arguments advanced in the book remain unconvincing.

Letwin's assertion that the exclusion of women from the mining workforce "contributed significantly, if quietly, to the viability of interracial unionism" (p. 7) seems to stand more on the logic of this position than on evidence. If the author is merely asserting that organizing the coalfields would have been more difficult if women and men worked together in the mines, the point seems valid, if unremarkable. But Letwin argues elsewhere in the book that coalfield struggles were exceptional for their ability to draw women into active roles in their communities and into confrontation with the operators (p. 149). Compared to steel, for instance, coal communities involved far more contact between the sexes, and were areas where—because of the absence of men from the camps during daylight hours—women played prominent roles in their communities. Yet interracial unionism in steel was virtually nonexistent during this period, and one suspects that the key difference was that industrial unionism opened up broad possibilities for collaboration which the exclusionist craft tradition did not. Gender seems to have entered the equation in Alabama in much more complex ways. During the 1908 strike, for instance, journalists launched a tirade against the UMW's organizing of interracial women's auxiliaries: respectable white society objected to white mining women coming into daily contact with black women in the context of a strike.[4] And when leading operators launched elaborate company welfare programs following the defeat of the 1908 strike, they devoted considerable attention to drawing camp women into the work, realizing the advantage that stable families would bring to challenge of rooting miners to the camps and, significantly, hoping to win the loyalty of women to the employers to guard against the revival of labor agitation.

Two other points deserve mention. The author follows a long line of historians of the Birmingham district in asserting that the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company's

abandonment of convict labor was voluntary (p. 161). The myth of TCI's benevolence in this area originated with Ida Tarbell who, in her generous biography of U. S. Steel's Judge Elbert Gary, attributed the company's termination of its contracts to Gary's "abolitionist convictions." Marlene Rikard's 1983 dissertation—which upholds a rather benign interpretation of TCI's employee welfare program—accepted the argument, and W. D. Lewis' otherwise excellent *Sloss Furnaces and the Rise of the Birmingham District: An Industrial Epic* (Tuscaloosa: 1994) repeated the mistake. In fact, TCI was forced out of the convict lease business through the combination of a bureaucratic foul-up on its own part and seemingly shady maneuvering involving state authorities and the company's competitors at Pratt Consolidated. Convicts were withdrawn from TCI only after a "very vigorous protest" from company president George Gordon Crawford. The incident is important because it forced TCI's hand in implementing company welfare: the company's "Number 12" mine, formerly housing convicts, was resurrected as its model Docena camp (from the Spanish *doce*, as in "twelve") a year later. The convicts were simply transferred to Pratt's Banner Mine.[5] Finally, in his discussion of the relation between black miners and Birmingham's accommodationist black middle class, Letwin cites a single speech from black UMW Vice President B. L. Greer to assert that "the philosophies (or at least rhetorical strategies) of the black middle class and black unionists in the New South were not always so incompatible as is often supposed" (p. 145). Yet it is worthwhile distinguishing between rhetoric and substance here. Greer's admittedly curious assertion that blacks "have been given suffrage, it has been justly said, too soon," was likely intended to express concerns antithetical to those weighing upon Booker T. Washington and his followers. Washington's embarrassment regarding the franchise derived from his frustration that so many blacks had deserted the "better class of whites" to vote with white riff-raff in the populist and anti-redeemer movements. It is not likely that Greer, an veteran unionist, viewed the problem from a similar perspective: more likely he shared the sentiment, widespread among white ex-Populists, that too many blacks had been duped into voting for Bourbon reactionaries.

It is very difficult to measure the resonance which accommodationist "race leaders" found in the coal camps. Scraps of evidence can be found in NAACP branch reports, in federal reports on wartime surveillance of Birmingham's African American community, and in the Urban League's Early Migration Surveys, sources which are

underutilized in Letwin's rendering of wartime developments. During the heyday of racial paternalism—in the years between the UMW's defeat in 1908 and the resurrection of the UMW in 1916—black miners constituted a captive audience for middle class "race leaders," who toured the camps under the sponsorship of leading anti-union operators. They spoke to packed audiences mainly because the operators had the upper hand, and miners risked their livelihoods if they did not attend. Their admonishments to black miners to "stop grumbling about the white man not paying us what we're worth" certainly would not have gone over well.

To the extent that these individuals did gain a hearing among black miners, it was their espousal of a variant of racial pride and not their lectures on thrift, sobriety or devotion to the employers that won it for them. And operators proved themselves amenable to a certain brand of racial separatism. From the mid-1890s through to the postwar period, leading operators attempted to prod black miners into organizing separate "unions," but their plans were singularly unsuccessful. It is significant, as well, that race leaders attempted to steer black miners away from the UMW by stigmatizing it as a "white man's union." Their diatribes against collaboration with poor whites, of course, did not preclude deference towards the most powerful whites in the district, who were attacking the UMW for the (real or imaginary) crime of advocating racial equality. Whatever relationship existed between accommodationists and black miners in the non-union years after 1908, we do know that as soon as black miners were presented a viable alternative, they deserted race leaders en masse for an alliance with white union miners. The evidence seems to illustrate that, far from demonstrating the compatibility of accommodationism with black working class sentiment, black UMW members provided Washington's heirs with the most serious challenge they faced anywhere in the South.

Given the span of Letwin's work, it may be asking too much to expect him to have gone into greater detail on the post-1908 period; the main lines of the story he has laid down are solid, balanced, and incisive. One suspects that the author would take some satisfaction from the fact that he has opened up the world of the turn-of-the-century Alabama miner to scholarly debate. The field of southern labor history, and our understanding of the complex relationship between black and white workers, has advanced considerably since Gutman issued his call for detailed studies three decades ago. *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism* sets a high standard for scholars as they continue the work of unraveling that complexity.

Notes:

[1]. Herbert Gutman, "The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America: The Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis and Something of Their Meaning: 1800-1900," in Julius Jacobsen, ed., *The Negro and the American Labor Movement* (Garden City: 1968), 117, 110; Herbert Hill, "Myth-Making as Labor History: Herbert Gutman and the United Mine Workers of America," *Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 2:2 (Winter 1988) 136, 132-3; Allan W. Draper, *Conflict of Interests: Organized Labor and the Civil Rights Movement in the South, 1954-1968* (Ithaca: 1994); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: 1995); Henry M. McKiven, Jr., *Iron and Steel: Class, Race, and Community in Birmingham, Alabama, 1875-1920* (Chapel Hill: 1995).

[2]. For an excellent survey of recent scholarship on race and labor, see Eric Arnesen, "Up From Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History," *Reviews in American History* 26 (1998): 146-74.

[3]. Letwin argues that "there is no evidence that the operators' recruitment of both blacks and whites represented any sort of divide-and-rule strategy" (p. 54) in the early years even as he acknowledges that they "drew upon a rich lode of racial and ethnic assumptions" as they

"sought to cobble together a [docile, efficient] workforce" (p. 24).

[4]. It is entirely possible that the charge that District 20 had organized interracial auxiliaries was a complete fabrication. I have been unable to determine whether it was true or not. It is interesting, however, that during the 1920 strike, union officials felt compelled from the beginning of the strike to make clear that black and white women would be organized into separate auxiliaries.

[5]. Ida Tarbell, *The Life of Judge Elbert H. Gary*, pp. 310-11; for a documentary record of the conflict between TCI and the State of Alabama over the removal of convicts, including the correspondence between TCI officials and the State, see *Testimony of President Oakley, Alabama State Board of Convicts, in U. S Steel Hearings, v. 4, p. 3112*. For a reconstruction of the events and their relation to the rise of welfare capitalism, see my dissertation, "'Up Against It': Race, Class, and Power in the Alabama Coalfields, 1908-21," (Brandeis University: 1998): 92-98.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-labor>

Citation: Brian Kelly. Review of Letwin, Daniel, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921*. H-Labor, H-Net Reviews. August, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2273>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.