

When the Red States Really Were Red

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The labor- and third-party movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have been studied and written about extensively by academics and writers on the left. Most readers of this journal are probably familiar with much of this material. This book, however, is of particular interest today for a couple of reasons. For one thing, the author concentrates on the South and emphasizes the biracial nature of the movement. Not only were African Americans a part of the movement, they played a significant role in it and there were integrated locals as early as the 1870s when Grange locals in northern Louisiana accepted black members. Obviously this did not happen without controversy.

Hild argues that what most authors have underemphasized is the natural alliance of farmers and laborers. Most laborers were not only of rural origin, they were largely employed in rural enterprises. And the farmers who employed them saw the banks, corporations, and the politicians who served them as the enemy. This enemy, in turn, could only continue to dominate the region by whipping up the racist sentiment that had such a powerful hold on the popular mind in the South. In large part what fueled this racist epidemic was the recent memory of Reconstruction.

As early as the 1870s the Grange was calling for a national graduated income tax. In Alabama the Greenback Labor Party organized farm workers. As early as 1882 one of the 22 seats in the state legislature won by the GLP was an African American. And by 1885 the Knights of Labor was organizing African Americans and women in Alabama and Tennessee.

So, what happened? Why did this movement disappear? Hild details the exclusionary voting laws and other attacks by the Democratic Party backed up by lynch mobs that played a significant role in the eventual destruction of this movement. But Hild emphasizes another factor. That is the role of the AFL under the leadership of Samuel Gompers. Under Gompers the AFL consciously aimed at limiting union membership to skilled (mostly male, mostly white) craftsmen. The broad class movement of the Knights of Labor and its predecessors was abandoned. Hild sums it up as follows:

Violence and antilabor laws alone, however, do not explain the slow growth of trade unions in most of the South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To a considerable extent the exclusionary nature of the AFL contributed to the problem. While trade unions of unskilled workers, such as hod carriers and streetcar railway workers, could and sometimes did affiliate with the AFL, as did semiskilled factory workers' unions and the United Mine Workers of America, skilled workers' unions represented most of the AFL rank and file. The AFL made far less effort to organize unskilled workers than had the Knights of Labor, and in the South in particular those workers constituted a large majority of the industrial workforce. Furthermore, the Knights had organized women and African Americans in limited but nevertheless substantial numbers. The AFL, however, did not follow suit. During the 1890s, according to historian Bruce Laurie, the "hardening of white male chauvinism, racism, and xenophobia in the context of trade autonomy all but slammed shut [AFL] doors to women, blacks, and eastern Europeans." While the last of these groups was relatively scarce in the South circa 1900, the first two were quite plentiful. But prejudices and the relative scarcity of those two groups in the skilled trades (a scarcity that AFL unions sometimes worked to ensure) meant that few women or blacks joined the ranks of the AFL. Unlike the Knights, the AFL did not organize domestic workers or farmers of any sort. The exclusion of the latter, of course, meant that the AFL trade union movement would not emulate the Knights of Labor as a farmer-labor movement.

The contemporary labor movement has abandoned the broad movement represented by the CIO of the thirties in favor of Gompers' approach. Today it is not so much skilled workers but public workers who are the easiest to organize. Unlike industrial workers who were the backbone of the AFL-CIO from the thirties to the fifties, their jobs cannot be moved overseas in the great globalization of modern capitalism. They depend, as Gompers did, on an arrangement with sympathetic politicians whose votes they can buy. But the consequence is that the labor movement is increasingly isolated from the majority of the working class.

A small footnote is in order. In the San Francisco Bay Area, as liberal a locale as can be found in the present day United States, the unions of the Bay Area Rapid Transit system (BART) were forced into a strike last September by a management that is counting on financing a 15 billion dollar renovation in part by cutting back the wages, working conditions, and safety of its employees. The result was a wave of public anger directed, not at management which provoked the strike, but at the employees who were portrayed by the news media as privileged exploiters of the working poor who use the system to get to their mostly non-union jobs.

This is the result that can be expected when unions depend on contributions to Democratic Party politicians rather than on an appeal to the majority of the working class to defend their members.