

The Alabama Communists in Days of Yore

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The rewriting of radical history has occupied two generations of US historians, in one way or another, and among some especially fine efforts in race-linked struggles, *Red, Black and White: The Alabama Communist Party, 1930–1950* by Mary Stanton is a gem.

The saga of the Communist Party in the American South of the 1930s-40s remains one of those mysteries so deep in political culture that it seemed hardly to be a story at all, before a couple of historic classics-to-be appeared during the 1970s-80s. The first to appear was *All God's Dangers* by Theodore Rosengarten, a vivid oral history of rural black uprising in the early 1930s; the second, by Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*, was a careful history of (mostly) black southern Communists in rural and urban settings. Each volume stirred major scholarly responses, in effect demanding asking what historians of the South, of labor, and of the American Left had overlooked.

The relevant literature has grown considerably since that time, and yet much of the mysteries remain, with significance in our own contemporary world so many

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generations later. How can a powerful progressive movement, outside of the Democratic Party insurgency but increasingly in the vicinity of it, rally forces under what would seem the most impossible conditions? What relation would any insurgency need to have with the wider web of dynamic, interracial social movements past and future? And for that matter, how might apparently solid right-wing districts be fractured today by actions of people within them? How, for instance might unions revive as centers of activity, and change the political setting, and how might churches black and white—not to mention Synagogues and Mosques—play a positive role in developments?

The most intriguing detail of some of the recent literature is certainly the hidden connections of the New Deal and the Communist Party. Long denied in the face of red-baiting, often hidden from public eye by Communists themselves, it now appears to be very much a two-way street. By the later 1930s and until the full force of the Cold War hit at the end of the 1940s, Communists needed (some) Democrats and those Democrats needed Communists, along with socialists, liberals and other people of good will courageous enough to face threats of physical harm, not to mention loss of jobs and careers.

The late James J. Lorence's *The Unemployed People's Movement, Leftists, Liberals and labor in Georgia* (2009) is one case in point. Lorence carefully explored the history of the Workers Alliance, evolving from a socialist-led unemployed movement of the early depression era into a catch-all effort to aid the poor. If the industrial union movement could not by its nature reach the unemployed including clients of the Works Progress Administration, the Atlanta Works Alliance in particular aggressively reached out. In the end, the defeats to the New Deal coalition in the 1938 elections foreshadowed anti-red HUAC hearings and the demoralizing effects of the Nazi-Soviet Pact announced in 1939. New forms of mobilization, often led by Communists, would come in wartime.The specific history of the unemployed movement was part of the past.

A forgotten story of Alabama radicals, recovered.

Mary Stanton's *Red, Black and White* further advances our knowledge much further with scrupulous detail but also the use of scholarly advances in the decade since Lorence's work appeared. If Robin Kelley found in the *Southern Worker* echoes of the Gospel and memories of the Union Army, we learn here that white people in

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Birmingham assumed Communists were atheists while black activists took a different view. It is intriguing that officials of mainstream Black organizations like Walter White of the NAACP took a perspective yet different: it was not godless communists but ruthless women ordering black men around, leading them to disaster.(p.21)

The real issue beneath all this was racial equality, the previously rare experience of black women and men, being treated as equals. *Southern Worker* editor James S. Allen (aka Solomon Auerbach) inevitably appears in these accounts, as does the small but significant Jewish population of some Southern cities. Here, the Left could, with luck, gain a foothold and often enough find allies from various camps. According to famous quip, the Communist party recruited industrial workers while the Socialist party, led by former minister Norman Thomas, recruited YMCA workers. In reality, millions of Americans, but especially the young, responded to the needs of the poor, making alliances with radicals unimagined a few years earlier.

In Stanton's account, it was legal defense cases that made the Communists and their allies seemed to be the Americans who cared about extreme injustice and willing to do something about it. "Legal lynchings," often a charge made by a white woman to cover up her own suspicious activity (such as an affair or even flirtation across racial lines), brought in defense attorneys and investigators. The League of Struggle, International Labor Defense and other organizations within or close to the Communist Party orbit outraged Southern officials but encouraged humanitarians of all kinds to think justice might come.

The defense of the so-called "Scottsboro Boys" accused of raping two white women (one repented and actively gave testimony in their favor) and sentenced to long prison terms, was galvanizing and not only for Communists. It was typical of the South that a "Norman Thomas Study Club" of Birmingham, meeting in the basement of Temple Beth El, with the active membership of the new rabbi, along with assorted pacifists, Christian socialists and a few outright communists.

In a way, this odd alliance of types forecast the Popular Front turn that we find in the final chapters. A characteristic figure, Joe Gelders—son of a prominent Alabama restaurateur and himself a physics professor beset by sickness and in need of surgery—put himself forward as a Red. By the end of the 1930s, and thanks in part to the New Deal's effects on the South, the Mine, Mill and Smelters union had actually built a base for unionization in Birmingham. Beaten terribly on a city street, his heart muscle punctured by a broken rib, Gelders nevertheless took the

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case of the union organizing Bessemer Steel to the La Follette Committee in Congress. An agreement with a union local was signed, something that would have been considered earlier to be impossible in the racist and reactionary Deep South.

Meanwhile, the CP and its friends launched the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, whose Report on the Economic Conditions of the South, offered decisive evidence that the Southern economy purportedly defended against communists was mostly owned by outsiders. Reds, therefore, were not the key “invaders” after all. Eleanor Roosevelt even arranged a meeting between Gelders and the president. Anti-lynching legislation was prepared (a local newspaper editor called this an attack on the “folkways of our people,” p.150).

The SCHW had gone where no other national organization was willing to go, and that is surely the chief lesson of the CPUSA in the South. Gelders himself launched the Southern News Almanac in 1940, with contributors as notorious (or distinguished) as Pete Seeger, a paper with more appeal than any Communist publication could gain.

Such efforts could not hold on with the coming of the War or, differently said, gave way to new projects like the Southern Negro Youth Conference, which held on until the Cold War’s full effects hit the Southern left with terrible effort. In another sense, the defeats of ardently pro-New Deal candidates in 1938 elections had forecast the limitations of the Left in large parts of the South.

One of the prominent US labor historians, David Montgomery, told me after he had visited Birmingham, that dozens of African American elderly, retired steelworkers, kept their membership in the Communist Party until their last days. The Southern Left had not failed them, and in that famous long arc of history, the effects of heroic struggles had been imprinted on a region and its future in civil rights and social justice.##

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