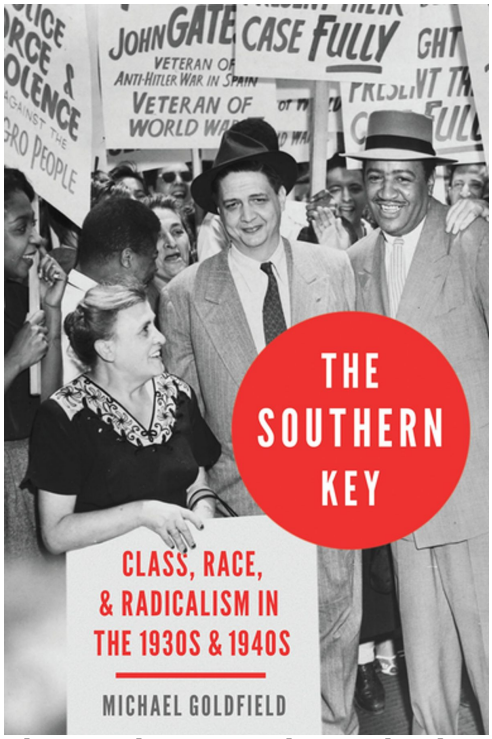
Goldfield Roundtable: Organizing Insights on the South

Posted on July 16, 2020 by Rosemary Feurer

This is our fourth entry for this week's roundtable discussion on Michael Goldfield's new book, *The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s*. Goldfield examines the failure to organize the South in the period of the workers insurgency of the 1930s and 1940s. He argues that the fate of the South determined the fate of the nation, and that unionization was the key to transforming the region. He asks important questions about whether it could have been organized, examining an extensive array of published and archival sources.



The Southern Key, by Michael Goldfield

We will post a new contribution to the roundtable each day for most of the week. The four roundtable commentators focus on key themes in Goldfield's book. Here is our schedule:

July 13: James Gray Pope discusses the key premises of *The Southern Key*, suggests the evidence Goldfield presents makes for a usable history, and he suggests they raise important questions about the role of democracy in unions and radical organizations. July 14: Ahmed White focuses on Goldfield's treatment of the Steelworkers union, and then raises important questions about counterfactuals and repression. July 15: William Jones questions whether Goldfield has addressed the intersection between law and politics adequately, and suggests he neglects the organizing that continued outside the Communist Party orbit. July 16: Rosemary Feurer appreciates Goldfield's survey of the South through "an organizer's eye," especially his discussion of the potential of timber and wood workers, but wishes he had contributed a more sustained discussion of how Left organizing was distinctive. July 17: Michael Goldfield writes a robust rejoinder to the key themes and questions raised by the reviewers.

Organizing Insights on the South, by Rosemary Feurer


Rosemary Feurer

In *The Southern Key* Michael Goldfield wants us to look beyond the traditional explanations for why the South remained the bastion of anti-unionism and reactionary politics after the mid-20th century union campaigns. These explanations include the legacy of slavery and racist divisions; political and social repression; the culture of the South, including religious influence and agricultural economy of deference and backwardness, which reinforced a distrust of collectivism; the alliance between the reactionary political forces and the Democratic Party in the South, which in addition to restricting the right to vote, cordoned off some workers from New Deal labor protections even before Taft-Hartley's right-to-work elements sealed the deal.

While Goldfield acknowledges these factors, he takes an organizer's eye to a survey of the Southern landscape. He spies the base for the seeding and then expansion of labor campaigns of the region. The key to changing the South was labor union organization, which would have rearranged the political economy. In explaining why it didn't happen, he implicates Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) union leadership and structures for major failures, arguing that they squandered the best opportunities. This, he suggests, was a factor of their liberal ideology, which led them to partnership with employers and the state and early elimination of the most capable organizers. In some cases there was an overt sacrifice of the South in order to eliminate their left flank and retain control of their unions. Goldfield also implicates the Communist Party, the leading left organized force in labor unions in the 1930s and 1940s, for their center-left policy of unity with liberals, which led them to leave such policies uncontested.

Indeed, by the time the CIO launched "Operation Dixie," the post-war campaign to organize the South, the poor strategy and myopia was ingrained, leading to the appointment of organizers for loyalty and anti-Communist credentials, a cohort of them racists; its failure was a given. Goldfield is blunt: "One is struck at times by the sheer incompetence and

stupidity" of CIO leadership."(33)

Goldfield brings key insights, such as a global analysis on organizing textile workers that gives a fresh perspective on old issues. The breadth of his command of the history of political economy of the South, state histories in the South, and of particular union and industry histories, lends credibility to his claims.

Goldfield sees coal miners as the vanguard of the early 1930s Southern base, following a pattern established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This was not the result of organizers sent from the national office in the wake of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) President John L. Lewis' negotiation for section 7(a) of the New Deal's National Industrial Recovery Act, which promised workers labor protections, as the story is usually told. Miners tended to organize the rest of their communities "wall-to-wall." This mattered for the Southern potential. For example, in the counties around Birmingham, Alabama coal miners helped to organize an array of other workers, from teachers to washer women, and were the base for interracial movement for the rest of the decade. When alliances were cultivated, true organizing possibilities unfolded. The UMWA started a voter registration drive in the counties around Birmingham, challenging the poll tax for both black and white workers. Goldfield suggests that if there could have been more concentration on building such regional footholds in the South, there would have been further successes.

But Lewis staunched democracy in the UMWA — in the way he set up key CIO organizing committees and who he appointed. This was part of a long reach of the UWWA model; though it was an industrial union, it had much experience in reigning in rank-and-file insurgencies. In addition to the threat from the Communist-led National Miners Union, in 1932 there was an almost complete bolt from the UMWA in Illinois, the strongest dues contributor. Lewis relied on the labor boards and government officials and alliances with repressive police and governmental forces to silence that rebellion.

Many have argued that the CIO would not have been possible without Lewis. Goldfield asks us to understand the costs of that influence, too. The structures he enforced and the bureaucrats he named were a heavy weight on the CIO. So without Lewis and the UMWA hierarchy, it's also possible that we would have had a more radical movement, one more alert to the racial contours of capitalism. Goldfield argues that the alliance with the New Deal state, stronger for other CIO officials than for Lewis, was a heavy weight as well.

In organizing the CIO unions, Lewis was savvy enough to realize that he needed radicals to organize, but he ensured that he could eliminate them easily. The Communist Party made it all too easy, Goldfield suggests. Moreover, his administrative control meant he could single-

handedly withdraw the UMWA from the CIO by 1942 and enter an alliance with the competing and more conservative American Federation of Labor, until he decided to disaffiliate with them as well. Goldfield shows how this made extension of coalition building that had begun in the early 1930s difficult. Certainly that mattered in Alabama, when suddenly the UMWA was no longer part of the insurgent coalition. The UMWA became Lewis' sinecure, growing increasingly corrupt, and corruption makes for poor organizing material.

Centralized control of organizing appointments along the lines of the UMWA model were repeated in steel, wood and textile, the unions with greatest potential in the South. One of the most important points of evidence Goldfield relates to refute the common notion that it took northern liberals to force the South to organize across the racial divide is from a set of photos of Steel Workers Organizing Committee staff that shows the elimination of African-Americans as organizers from 1937-1940. Liberal officials ignored the protests from local allied Black organizations.(162-164)

An enormous log is loaded and ready for transport to the mill. Feurer: Goldfield shows that "woodworkers, including lumberjacks and wood processing workers, were the most ripe for organizing." Photo credit: Center for American History, UT-Austin, East Texas Collection (DI#01288).

A similar pattern is seen in Goldfield's discussion of why the CIO failed to organize Southern woodworkers, a chapter that is in my view the most impressive and devastating part of the

book. Woodworkers, including lumberjacks and wood processing workers, were the most ripe for organizing, no less so in the South than the Northwest where the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) was headquartered. There were over 300,000 workers in this Southern industry, the second largest, and half of these were African-American. The IWA leadership was left-wing, and called upon CIO support to help launch the Southern drive in 1939, a drive blocked by right-wing elements in the union. It was in the wake of the government's deportation of the left-wing President of the union. Instead of contesting this deportation, Lewis required the IWA let him appoint all organizers and directors in exchange for assistance. Rather than help launch a Southern drive, Lewis-appointee Adolph Germer, who Goldfield calls a representative of the type of the CIO's "narrow-minded, authoritarian, bureaucratic operative"(221), appointed and elevated right-wingers, and that led to long-term abandonment of the South. Since woodworkers were in strategic locations across the south, and were inclined to promotion of solidarity, it was a loss of a base more promising than textile organizing.

Goldfield's book does not make a systematic case for why left-wing organizers would have organized the South more effectively, which was disappointing. There are tidbits spread throughout the book, but even in the conclusion he misses the opportunity to show why they might have succeeded. He asserts that Communists were "committed, militant, and fearless" (360) especially in respect to organizing African-Americans and putting women at the front of organizing drives. On that score, he provides a lot of details, which begin to distinguish liberal from radical organizing (236, 299, 360). What's missing is how the experiences of the 1930s enhanced the knowledge base that was bequeathed from struggle-based unionism in an earlier era.

One can gain a sense of the distinctions in *Strike Strategy*, a 1950 book by Steel Workers Organizing Committee organizer and Communist Party member John Steuben, who Goldfield mentions was a part of the team that organized steel in 1937, using the manual on organizing by William Z. Foster. Steuben's book, denounced widely by liberals when it was published, summarized a class conscious union perspective, one with a long lineage both outside and inside the Party, and in fact some of it learned from the UMWA's militant campaigns. Because the book is about strikes, and not specifically organizing campaigns, it's only a partial knowledge base, but it is a window. What's most notable about it is his keen instructions regarding rank-and-file empowerment, attention to worker-led alliances, as well as to employer violence, race and red-baiting, including the PSYOPs game plans such as the Mohawk Valley Formula (the employer plan developed in the 1930s.) Steuben's book was an update to Foster's book, and an alternative way of tackling power structures, rejected by much of the labor officialdom. [1]

A specific example of that kind of learning was clear in United Electrical Workers District 8, headquartered in St. Louis, which attempted to advise Operation Dixie officials and was rebuffed. (Instead, Operation Dixie hired racist District 8 opponents). District 8 representatives brought their collective experiences to bear in organizing southern Indiana, including towns bordering on and in Kentucky (where they also advised Farm Equipment Workers in the Louisville campaign Goldfield mentions). They rejected blitz hand-billing campaigns for the South, and instead made the case for community-based campaigns with long-term commitments. This was what it had taken to conquer Evansville, Indiana due to the severe repression. It took them 10 years, from 1937-1947, to defeat the heart of the employers' National Metal Trades Association leadership there, which used all of the plans of the Mohawk Valley Formula, and more. Always attentive to power structures of capitalism, they had used alliances to build a civic base for countering repression. They felt their strategy would work in the South.[2]

Lisa Phillips' book *A Renegade Union* also conveys left-style organizing by New York City–based labor union District 65 in Suffolk, Virginia. Organizers knew they were not to relocate, but only to remain long enough to build rank-and-file leadership to "get workers to run things, not the organizers." They built a presence, establishing a union headquarters to indicate they were there for the long haul, making it a second home for the union faithful. They emphasized black workers as leaders, "focusing less on forcing white workers to accept black workers in the local" and more on negotiating contracts for black workers that would make white workers desire the same.[3]

Keep in mind that these unions, as well as the few mentioned as models in Goldfield's concluding chapter, all ultimately failed. Was it because they were marginalized because of red-baiting, or would they have failed nonetheless? Goldfield is pretty sure that democracy and organizing was the key.

[1] John Steuben, *Strike Strategy* (New York: Gaer Associates, 1950).

[2] Rosemary Feurer, *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950 (*University of Illinois Press, 2006).

[3] Lisa Phillips, *A Renegade Union: Interracial Organizing and Labor Radicalism* (University of Illinois Press, 2013).

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