

Noel Ignatiev's Acceptable Men: Life in the Largest Steel Mill in the World: A Conversation

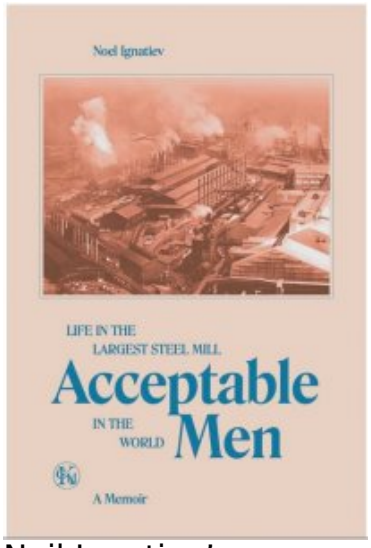
Posted on June 17, 2022 by Alex Lichtenstein

In 2021, the radical publisher, Charles H. Kerr, published a "memoir" by the late Noel Ignatiev (1940-2019), Acceptable Men Life in the Largest Steel Mill in the World. Rather than review the book, *Labor OnLine* decided instead to convene a conversation with four activist-scholars who could shed light on Noel's experience at US Steel, and offer their own critique of his account of working life there.

Ignatiev, best known by labor scholars as the author of *How the Irish Became White* (1995), was a key figure (along with David Roediger, Theodore Allen, and Alexander Saxton) in the infusion of the concept of "whiteness" into labor studies. But Noel always considered himself a revolutionary first, and an academic second. His career as an activist was spent primarily on the anti-Stalinist and anti-racist left, in alignment with the thinking of C.L.R. James and other Trotskyists who looked to quotidian workplace "self-activity" as the gold standard of radical proletarian

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consciousness. By the late 1960s he was an active member of a small group of Chicago-based radicals assembled in the Sojourner Truth Organization.



Neil Ignatiev's new book is a memoir of his time in Gary, Indiana's steel mill.

Like many left-wing activists of that period, Noel saw entering factory work as a means to transplant his radical politics from the student movement onto the shop floor. The posthumous *Acceptable Men* isn't really a memoir, because it covers only a brief, if compelling, moment in Noel's long political career; rather it is a penetrating ethnographic account of six years of working days (and nights) during the early 1970s in the U.S. Steel Gary Works, at the time the self-proclaimed "largest steel mill in the world." Hugging the southwestern shore of Lake Michigan, the Gary Works was both part of a southeast Chicagoland industrial cluster (where STO was based) and embedded in the Black majority community of Gary, Indiana.

Over the course of several weeks, Alex Lichtenstein created an exchange with Emiliano Aguilar, Ruth Needleman, Steven Pitts, and Roberta Wood about Noel and his memoir. They all found much of value in *Acceptable Men*; but based on their own extensive experience and knowledge they also point to many of the limitations in his vision. Ignatiev, ever the polemicist, would have had it no other way. The results of this conversation can be found below.

Participants

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Emiliano Aguilar Jr. is a Ph.D. Candidate in History at Northwestern University. His dissertation, "Building a Latino Machine," focuses on how the ethnic Mexican and Puerto Rican community of East Chicago, Indiana, navigated corrupt machine politics to pursue their inclusion into the city.

Ruth Needleman, author of *Black Freedom Fighters in Steel: The Struggle for Democratic Unionism,* is Prof. Emerita at Indiana University, Northwest, and divides her time between local Gary struggles (local hiring, CBA, against GEO immigrant prison) and teaching & writing on global social movements.

Steven Pitts recently retired from the UC Berkeley Labor Center where for 19 years he focused on leadership development and Black worker issues. He is the creator and host of the podcast Black Work Talk, which looks at the struggles to build Black workers' collective power and to challenge racial capitalism.

Roberta Wood, elected in 1976 as the first woman on USWA Local 65's Executive Board, worked at US Steel Southworks plant in South Chicago from 1974 to 1982. She co-founded the USWA District 31 Women's Caucus and is a lifelong member of the Communist Party USA..

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Alex Lichtenstein:

Noel Ignatiev's memoir focuses on his working life at U.S. Steel's Gary works during the early 1970s. He entered the factory as part of a generation of New Leftists who sought to "colonize" the shop-floor and radicalize the working class. Could you talk about your own understanding of these efforts, and Ignatiev's place within this tendency?

Emiliano Aguilar Jr.:

The New Left is an interesting term for a broad range of social and intellectual movements across the globe. These diverse movements, often associated with student radicalism, altered the perception and relationship between residents and their government. However, this is only a fraction of the story. As Johanna Fernández argues in their seminal history about The Young Lords, "Although the New Left is popularly understood as predominantly white and campus-based, its origins are rooted in the intrepid and morally righteous sit-ins, and radical

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campaigns of the youth wing of the civil rights movement…" Within the framework for the direct democracy, or "participatory democracy" emphasized by the New Left, the struggles of working-class communities for simple things like regular garbage collection, community meals for children, and even getting a city to put in a streetlight expands our understanding of this generation and the success they achieved locally. Fernández's work about The Young Lords offers an excellent parallel to the scholarship and broadens our understanding of the New Left block-by-block.

Ignatiev fits into the traditional narrative about the New Left in his effort to radicalize steelworkers at U.S. Steel Gary Works. As a member (and later officer) of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), Ignatiev became a vehicle to witness the day-to-day encounters of working-class steelworkers with capitalism in "the largest steel mill in the world." Ignatiev placed little hope in the region's unions, with the common labor cause being more symbolic of the Old Left. He claimed that the union "is a defensive organization" at best, but the working class needed something more to radicalize itself against capital's subordination. Through his observations, Ignatiev highlights instances of workers asserting their schedules in close-knit shop-floor actions, whether it is fishing for smelt, playing cards, or using company tools to fix a boat motor.

Ignatiev, an ex-student, claimed that he left college to work in a factory for two reasons: to be closer to the working class and assist that class in its struggles. In keeping this past secret, Ignatiev wanted to build rapport with his colleagues and spent many of the early chapters in the memoir listening and observing. Through his work in the Sojourner Truth Organization (STO) and the *Calumet Insurgent Worker*, a printed newsletter, Ignatiev and his comrades hoped to elevate the voice of primarily black working-class laborers. This newsletter also hoped to connect various working-class struggles on shared injustices and actions into participation and support. However, as Ignatiev noted, sometimes this amounted to nothing, such as sharing information about a nearby autoworker strike with steelworkers. Ultimately, I think these stories about STO offer an interesting parallel to the struggles of coordinating these efforts from the ground-up, rooted in the grievances (or as one union official distinguished in the memoir: gripes) of the workers.

Ruth Needleman:

I examine this issue from the perspective of the "colonizer."

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Life-changing experiences in Chile during the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende (1972-73) led me to quit my job at the University of California at Santa Cruz in 1973. I took a job first with the United Farmworkers and soon after at a plastics factory in Long Island City. I know the term “colonize” has been used at various times in history to describe the entrance of radicals into factories to advocate for stronger unions and a better world. I was part of this migration.

I have always found the term “colonize,” however, to be offensive, deeply offensive. It turns radical efforts into a part of the imperial project—leftists colonizing workers, bringing “civilization” to an underdeveloped world of workers! It was not, unfortunately, an inaccurate characterization of what some “organizing” looked like.

Some went in to “agitate, educate and organize” workers; they came bringing the lessons of class solidarity and consciousness into factories, as many had done in the thirties and earlier. Many so-called leftists—another annoying label—learned more than they taught. I certainly did.

My reading of Noel’s book leads me to believe he saw his mission, in a sense, as a colonizer because he believed he could educate and change workers with his occasional lectures and efforts to hang with African American brothers. Of course, Noel was an early voice against white supremacy, but it was his post-factory contributions that contributed to the broader anti-racist struggle.

During his employment, he really did little to educate and organize white workers and even ignored the multiracial efforts at his steel mill during his time there. He makes no mention of the Ad Hoc Committee of Black Steelworkers, or the multiracial Steelworker Fightback or the District 31 Women’s Caucus, all active and effective reformers at Gary Works. He suffered—to use another term of the time—from ultra-leftism, dismissing unions and all efforts to make the unions fight for their members.

He learned a lot about steelmaking and steelworker culture but his assumptions interfered with his work and learning. His story about health and safety illustrated this attitude: he believed he had taught workers about how the boss always blames the worker for accidents or injuries. I taught labor studies to steelworkers for 40 years and knew from experience that workers understood that though they often feared to act or just chalked it up to boss behavior.

I too thought I knew more than the workers in my factory, a horrid plastics

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sweatshop with an invisible Teamsters' local union. I did know more about some things like history but not others like the immigrant experience. Workers there had bought into lies about each other. The workforce was Southern Black and immigrant and these two groups turned on each other rather than unite. My struggles there taught me more than I could possibly teach the workers, although I tried. Since that job in the mid-seventies, I have continued to learn about divisions, organizing, bosses and systems. When I started teaching labor studies in 1981, I had to learn from my students or I could never have taught them anything.

I had actually begun my teaching career having to learn more about my subject than I could teach. I started one of the first Latin American Studies programs without having done more than study Latin American literatures. I learned with my students and that shaped my approach to teaching, organizing and politics. Learn more than preach. Listen more than talk. Then I discovered Paulo Freire's popular and transformational education. Focus on the process not the end goal. Empower workers rather than tell them what to believe or to lead them. "Colonizers" impose their ideas and rarely listen.

Colonizers never win the loyalty or support of the colonized. Organizers who went into the factories with answers generally did not win the loyalty or support of the workers. Rarely did they bring about the changes they dreamed of. So in rejecting the term "colonizer" and its connotations, I still think that students, intellectuals and activists who went into the factories did good. Many helped build rank and file caucuses, helped democratize unions and labored to improve the working conditions. Those who remained part of the working classes continued to learn, inspire and be inspired.

Most of us who took on working-class jobs learned and continue to learn from those experiences. Instead of referring to "leftists" as colonizers, I learned in Chile under Allende that it was the AFL-CIO's leadership that was colonizing labor in Latin America by setting up rightwing organizations to destroy existing progressive unions. Their anti-communist crusade targeted any and every progressive union. They worked with U.S. corporations to erase radicalism. U.S. labor leaders were the colonizers. Not us.

Steven Pitts:

The New Left is a complicated term. On the one hand, it is simply a term that labels a generation of political actors who strived to make the United States live up to the

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democratic ideals that are embedded in mythology of this country. Because this generation came of age after the smothering of a previous generation of political actors who had similar goals, they were characterized as the "New" Left in contrast to the earlier "Old" Left. On the other hand, the term is complicated because the manner in which race and racism permeates our society has made both "Lefts" appear to be white; in addition, by turning the non-white Left invisible, those Black, Brown, Asian and Native American activists who were clearly anti-capitalist and sought to build movements rooted in the working-class segments of their communities were perceived to various forms of militant anti-racists or revolutionary nationalists. A final complicating factor is that as a result of the Right using charges of "cultural elitism" to push back against the Left, the New Left was also seen as being largely populated by rich or middle-class white students from elite universities. So, the strategy employed by a segment of 60s activists to advance revolution by obtaining factory jobs and trying to organize their working-class brothers and sisters is portrayed as a futile gesture by kids "playing" at revolution who would soon return to their class trajectory and take jobs bequeathed them by their daddies.

This is not my understanding of the activism I was a part of. The U.S. Left has always been multi-racial and multi-class. Regardless of individual motivations, a common denominator running through the actions of most that obtained industrial employment was the sense that racism permeated US society; the State was profoundly anti-democratic; the web of institutions that shaped life in the United States reproduced racial, class, and gender inequalities; and *Pax Americana* was less concerned with achieving global peace than it was with maintaining US global dominance. I think this analysis has stood the test of time and the current rise of Right-wing authoritarianism was made easier because the problems the Left saw (and fought) in the 60s and 70s were not addressed in deep structural ways.

While the analysis has stood the test of time, it is more difficult to evaluate the practices of those who joined organizations and sought revolution by working alongside of workers. (The use of the term, "colonize" requires a longer conversation. It was not used by members of the Left I was a part of and I cannot think of any positive connotation associated with the word.) Any good evaluation has to begin with the reality that the industrial composition of the working class and the spatial distribution of working class was shifting prior to the late Sixties (think of the shift in manufacturing jobs from the Northeast and Midwest to the South and Southwest in the United States and from the global North to the global South and

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rise of automation reducing the number of jobs needed to produce the same amount of manufacturing output). Thus, the terrain the Left sought to organize was radically changing just as the Left tried to get a foothold in the working class. In addition, the Left – never very large – was fractured into several competing organizations; these groups had differing views on the nature of working-class organizations and differing views on how to build Left power among workers (e.g. how to work with unions; how to deal with racism and sexism among workers; how to deal with reform movements).

With respect to Noel Ignatiev's place within the section of the Left who strived to get industrial jobs, it is hard to fully evaluate his organization's legacy from his memoir. He does not provide enough information to fully examine many issues. The USWA is largely invisible in his narrative but the contested terrain featuring the union is mentioned. The 116-day strike in 1959 impacted Ignatiev's close friend, Jackson: how did a weak institution pull off a nearly 4-month strike? The Consent Decree signed to address racism in the steel industry is mentioned but the absence of any mention of the struggle that resulted in the Decree implies the Labor Department aggressively fought for Black workers without any outside pressure; this analysis is at odds with the dominant Left view of the State.

The last issue I want to raise involves fighting racism and sexism in daily factory life. Ignatiev clearly saw the manner in which the company's policies and practices and workplace cultures structured how race and gender were experienced. He also clearly picked which battles to fight and which battles to accept. I am not being critical of his choices. I just wish we had heard more about his choices, the context within which he made those choices, and how the choices were informed by the fierce debate within the Left over "the National Question" and "the Woman Question". Without such a grounded understanding of factory life, the Left will continue to issue pronouncements that have minimal impact on actually fighting racism and sexism.

Roberta Wood:

The concept of "new left" was meant to delegitimize "old left" – communists and those associated with them – first and foremost the labor movement. All were said to have "sold out." This included the working class. This "sold out" narrative ignores the history of the repression of not only the Communist Party but also the hundreds of both working class and multi-class organizations that were part of a broad progressive movement (from immigrant rights to farmers to civil liberties to

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sharecroppers to women's rights to civil rights and more). Anti-communism was also a tool in decimating the labor movement – casting out 2 million member worth of progressive unions and thousands of leaders and militant rank and filers from remaining labor organizations . This history was buried in the arrogance of many of the ultra-left student leaders. More than a few of them came from not "middle class" but decidedly capitalist class families. The narrative of the "new left" was an anti-working-class concept, dividing our class by generations and race and erasing our history. I have to admit I briefly subscribed to it. I was an adolescent then and had to go thru a phase of rejecting my parents. I quickly grew out of it. Some folks never did.

I'm so glad the rest of you took on the whole concept of "new left" from another angle – of who it excluded. In reality, there's no break with the legacy of the civil rights movement, the women's movement to the upsurge in the 70's.

Though college students got the attention, it was that entire generation's role – perhaps most importantly the working class youth – African American, Latino, Native American and white -who refused to fight in Vietnam that led to an unprecedented defeat of the world's most powerful imperialist power. This was the basis of a sea change in our country's politics and labor movement. And the rank and file movement – black caucuses, Ad Hoc, CLUW, National Steelworkers Rank and File – turned a corner down the path we're still on, away from business unionism towards authentic class struggle unionism.

RE: COLONIZERS

I really wanted to hate this book, but I found myself reading it from cover to cover in one sitting: it brought me the gift of reliving some of the best years of my life.

The author is a wonderful story teller, but a lousy advocate for the working class.

Thankfully the book is heavy on story telling, and light on analysis.

Ignatiev gives loving descriptions of the production process, and tools, related to his appreciation of the skills of workers.

His bond with his partner Jackson forms the backbone of his story. He shares the day to day life at work that is rarely celebrated in our culture.

For these portrayals I give him lots of points. In a capitalist society that has a stake

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in undervaluing workers' contribution it shouldn't surprise us that the human relations we form in the workplace are not only unrecognized – when they are noted, they are not just undervalued but also seen as peripheral to our lives, while family connections are exalted as the be all and end all. Yet the people that we spend most of our waking hours with are our other adult co-workers. We not just eat and nap together, we face and solve problems – both mechanical, electrical and social. Ignatiev does a beautiful job of telling that story not in generalities but in real live incidents that are genuine. And he masterfully paints the backdrop against which this takes place, describing in living detail the machinery and processes .

His description of social relationships is less authentic and a little less loving.

Maybe it starts with the concept of "radicalizing the working class." Or straightening out white workers.

I'd like to digress here to give a little background on my understanding of the origins of the term "colonizer." I believe it was the Communist Party, of which I have been a member since 1969, that began using that term. I have to believe it was meant ironically, perhaps to "occupy" capitalist territory, but I agree that it is an offensive term that makes light of the oppression of colonized peoples. It was not used or advocated since I've been a member, but I heard old-timers talk about it years ago.

Rather, at the time I joined the Party we talked about a strategy of "industrial concentration." I think we spoke of it as a strategy for building the Party and its influence among the working class. In retrospect I think now that it would be better to think of it not as a strategy for the Party, but rather as a strategy for the class – as a strategy for building class consciousness and power. Every strategy is based on leveraging influence. If, as Marxists believe, it is the working class -the WHOLE class that will move society forward – "free the human race" – where are the points that move the class? The Party attempted to identify those *industries*. (as opposed, for example to identifying certain sectors, i.e. skilled workers, native born workers, government workers, young workers, Black workers, low paid workers, etc.). The Party going back to the mid-20s said it was workers in *basic industries (*basically what Marx identified as Dept. 1 – mining, steel, rubber, machine building, electrical, transportation) because they were in a position to move the whole class due to: 1. They were in a position to stop profits – tie up the whole economy due to their role in the financial structure of monopoly capital and providing the raw materials for other manufacturing; 2. They came into direct conflict with the most powerful

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monopoly capital profit-making sector, laying the basis for class consciousness; 3. Those industries had Black and white work forces (but sadly not women – a big weakness in retrospect); 4. They worked in enormous work places bringing together huge numbers of workers, again increasing class consciousness.

Industrial concentration meant bringing to bear our (the Party's) resources, but also influencing other working-class movements and people to focus on the workers and families of these industries. Thus writing about and popularizing their struggles across the board, including to workers in other industries, focusing on those cities and neighborhoods, the families, churches, fraternal organizations of those workers. Overall paying special attention to the unions in those industries. We had concentration districts like Ohio, Michigan, Western Pennsylvania, concentration cities like Gary and Birmingham, concentration neighborhoods like South Chicago, concentration plants like South Works. Thus the struggles of workers in basic industries were at the center of discussions of the Party across the nation including in clubs far from those workers. An important part of that was for many of us to go to work in these industries.

At first glance, Noel and I would seem to have a lot in common (including even a grandmother named Reba who immigrated from Russia!). But while his move to go to work at a job in the steel mill – and subsequent decision to leave – was a political decision, my decision – and determination to stay – was simultaneously a lifestyle choice. (I realize that is a rather incongruous term for this conversation, but it seems to fit.)

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Black Freedom Fighters in Steel, artist Gaia, 1013 Broadway, Gary, 2018
Credit: https://www.museumofthestreet.org/known-artists

I didn't identify as an intervener in the working class. Rather I experienced working in an industrial setting as a comfortable nest compared to my discomfort in the world of academia and its insidious culture of male supremacy which I fled after two years of college. I never looked back.

But mainly, at that point in my life – age 24 – I wanted a "real" job with benefits, security, to look to establish a home and a family in a community. That's what I meant to do when I applied for a job at US Steel South Works on April 18, 1974. The previous winter Gus Hall and Henry Winston had called me in to New York to suggest that I relocate from Southern California to a "concentration" city to work in a steel mill. It seemed like a plan.

People take jobs for all sorts of reasons: first of all to make money, get health insurance, become an adult; get respect from their family and community, do something they like to do, learn a skill, do good in the world, you name it. For me it was all of those, plus the idea of being "where the rubber meets the road" in the

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class struggle was part of that. Those reasons did not make me an inauthentic worker.

Noel says the first thing he tried to do was “fit in.” But my concept of the working class INCLUDED me, although I admit I at first had the same feelings. But I’ve learned that the working class is not a homogenous pool of ignorant beer-drinking stereotypes. In the steel mill I encountered bullies and nice people, preachers and teachers, people who loved tropical fish, glamorous models, lesbians, gourmet chefs. Nature lovers and deejays. Neatniks and slobs. The thing we had in common was a shared work life. We also had an objective interest in overcoming exploitation and thus also shared the possibility of a culture of solidarity that struggle engenders.

So there was a place for me, and I think my co-workers honored my niche as a working class intellectual with a passion for meetings, and a sort of jail house lawyer.

Years later, in the early 2000s I was working as a worker-organizer with the IBEW for cable TV workers. I worried that the radical bumper stickers on my car might turn off the workers in a plant my co-organizer and I were approaching and asked Lynn, herself a cable TV installer if I should take them off, or park around the corner. “No Roberta,” she replied with great wisdom. “That’s who we are, and they will appreciate us being honest with them.” And so it was.

So I not only don’t like the concept of “colonizing.” I don’t like the term “salting.” The workforce is full of salt and pepper and mint and lime, garlic and cilantro, and what we add is a legitimate and organic part of it, as we are of the working class.

I reject the idea of “radicalizing” the working class. In fact, as I look back on my experience, I don’t even like the concept of organizing or mobilizing the working class. I’d rather see it as being part of a collective effort – embraced by the entire working class – to improve our situation. In my view, that means socialism. But I’m ready to work with other toward other goals that make our lives better, if it’s childcare centers or clean bathrooms.

Others have written of learning from the workers. Of course, I did that too. But I think I learned, TOGETHER with them (especially my experience with women steelworkers as we organized a caucus) the science, how to build and be part of collectives – informal perhaps even more so than formal. We learned together that

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we had to make provisions for people's children at meetings. How to figure out family friendly meeting times. That to get people to go to meetings and conferences you had to go together. That to sell your co-worker a raffle ticket you don't have to go into a big explanation – just ask for the money and explain the cause later, once they've invested. To figure out what social infrastructure – that is informal and interlocking networks of people- is needed to give the class consciousness and power.

To me, terms like colonize, organize, mobilize – even salting – invoke images of us and them, and more subtly, manipulation. That was not the lifestyle I chose. I wanted to live my life, start and raise a family, be part of a community in an authentic way, not with someone as my object.

Ignatiev is a great storyteller and it's so easy for me to see in my mind's eye the card table where he and his co-workers gathered to play cards, to drink coffee, to scale fish, to repair their boat motor, to discuss how to fix a piece of broken machinery. Pooling their collective wisdom in the way that workers do because they work together. Those are pictures I treasure, and I can see he did too. Maybe he's being modest or maybe it's true, but he portrays himself as having a passive role in all these situations – an observer, not an initiator. Maybe that's why the reader never sees those same workers – gathered around that table discussing how to take on some of the injustices they experience to strengthen the union, to take on racism.

It could have happened. Maybe it did, but went over his head?

Alex:

Perhaps my rather loose and unthinking use of some key terms has prompted a reaction. Let me explain my resort to them as a means of leading up to my next question;

I have seen both Noel and the STO described as elements of the "New Left", in large part because they grew out of the remnants of SDS and some allied movements in Chicago, such as the Black Panther Party. As several of you correctly point out, it is a serious mistake to imagine the New Left as little more than white, middle-class students—this was indeed a broad social movement defined by its mobilization of a new generation of youth along multiple axes of class, race, and ethnicity. It deliberately distinguished itself from the so-called "Old Left", at least at first, in

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rejecting a vanguard party and in organizing beyond what C. Wright Mills famously called “the labor metaphysic.” Yet by the end of the 1960s, that neglect of the working-class as a potential radical political force and the workplace as a key site of struggle led many left activists in the movements of the 1960s back to the factory—for all kinds of reasons, as several of you note.

That renewed interest in labor (stimulated, in part, by what was happening in Paris, in Italy, and among Black workers in Detroit) was the origin of the colloquial term “colonize”—which I, for one, never took to mean (even in quotes) “colonizing” *the working class*, but rather the effort of the left, broadly speaking, to seed the *workplace* (not “salt” the working class) with its partisans and activists. As Roberta notes, there was—and is–a much better term for this, one that long pre-dated the 1960s: industrial concentration.

Noel, I would venture, was somewhat atypical of this “New Left” generation that entered factories at the end of the decade, however. First, he was a bit older—thirty, by the time he took a job at the steel mill. Second, like more than a few of his generation of radicals he had family links to the Communist Party (and briefly passed through it himself), but he was very much already in and of the working class. Finally, to the degree that Noel carried a “politics” into the workplace it drew very heavily on a slightly different tradition—that represented by the “Facing Reality” group, or the “Johnson-Forrest Tendency”, forged in Detroit by C.L.R. James and others on the anti-Stalinist left during the 1940s. Above all, this movement had three distinguishing features: first, it rejected the CP in particular and the idea of the vanguard party in general; second, this movement believed that workers’ “self-activity”—that is the inherent and accumulated wisdom of the shop floor—was a natural source of solidarity, mutual aid, and radical praxis; and third, as James had insisted, in the U.S., organizing the Black working class was imperative for radicals.

And this brings me around to my next question, which some of you have already anticipated: given the commitment of Noel and the STO to organizing among Black, Latino/a, and women workers, and to combatting racism among white workers, what appear to be the limits of this approach, as detailed in his memoir?

Ruth:

Ignatiev did not theorize about his organizing approach beyond his commitment to revolution and his contempt for unions. At Gary Works, he hired into maintenance, a

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craft department in the mill dominated by white workers. He chose to hang around Black workers, but he did not identify this as a strategic approach.

Skilled jobs had historically been reserved for white men. Small numbers of Black workers had moved up into the trades over time and against resistance, but very few until after the 1960s and the struggles of the Ad Hoc Committee of Black Steelworkers to integrate the better job departments and sequences.

Until the 1974 Consent Decree, seniority was specific to a job sequence, so if workers hired into a dirty job in the open hearth or the coke plant, they could only move into a different department or job sequence by going to the bottom of the seniority list. This locked blacks into the worst areas and jobs.

Plant-wide seniority had long been a demand of black mill workers. Chair of the grievance committee at Inland Steel [in East Chicago, IN] during World War II, Bill Young, had repeatedly demanded plant-wide seniority and organized actions at the mill gates. Young was the first African American to hold the position of chair of a Grievance Committee in basic steel. The union leadership resisted that demand and the integration of white sequences and departments in order to protect white members. The 1974 Consent Decree opened a door.

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United States Steel plant, circa 1970. Source: Wikipedia Commons, National Archives

In the context of our previous conversation, I want to note that the CPUSA had an actual policy on colonizing, urging its members to find employment in strategic industries like steel and auto. The first wave of “colonizers” from the CPUSA came to Gary in the late 1940s. The Party had at that time announced a policy called colonization to encourage more members to go into strategic industries like steel and auto. Party member Ed Yellen, in his book on his HUAC experiences, *In Contempt*, refers to this policy of colonization that brought him to Gary. Al Samter, also a party member, moved from New York and hired into the coke plant at Gary Works, also in the late 40’s. The coke plant—one of the most toxic areas—was home to the first Black caucus founded by Curtis Strong in the late 40’s, called the Sentinel League. It evolved in the 50’s to a plantwide caucus called the Eureka Club. Strong then went on to help form a national caucus, called the Ad Hoc Committee, in the sixties with Rayfield Moody in Chicago. How could Ignatiev ignore these developments?

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The CPUSA and other left formations encouraged their members to hire into the unskilled and more dangerous areas of the mill to organize. Ignatiev does not explain why he accepted maintenance and makes no mention of these Black organizations in the mill when he arrived. He chose to ignore the union at a time when powerful reform movements were rising nationally in the mills led by Blacks, women, and Latinx workers. At one point he argued that the courts were more effective than the unions, as if the Consent Decree were not the product of widespread rank-and-file protest from Alabama to Baltimore to Gary.

The “new left,” by the way, incorporated many parts of the old left, including red diaper babies like Noel, and disaffected Party members. There were many strains of activists, including a group of Maoist organizations, which saw themselves as the continuation of the old Party, minus what they defined as Soviet revisionism, such as the “peaceful road to socialism.”

The left that grew out of the old CP also embraced the CP’s approach to the national question, highlighting the demand for self-determination of Blacks in the South (the “black belt”). These organizers went consciously into unskilled jobs and focused organizing against racism by working with white workers and fighting plant discrimination, forcing the union into the struggle.

Ignatiev provided very detailed descriptions of life in the mill in his skilled group but he did not talk with white workers about racism or with men about sexism. He specifically noted that he would go to gatherings and be the only white person. That is not the way to fight racism. He also tried calling attention to the sexist remarks of a white coworker but concluded “I did not pursue the matter.”

I found a number of his pronouncements to be questionable. After joining a bridge club, he wrote: “The club offered me a window into black life, revealing to me the fluid nature of class in the black community.” Really? But worse, in reference to the 1919 strike in Gary, he argued: “Not surprisingly, black workers refused to support the strike, and it was widely acknowledged that they ‘broke the great steel strike.’” Just not true, especially not in Gary. The introduction of Blacks as scabs during the strike occurred mainly on the East coast at the older mills. In Gary, Blacks supported the strike, and the very few who entered the mill came from Alabama and entered on ore ships. At every rally held in Gary, months before and during the strike, Black and white steelworkers spoke out for racial unity.

Ignatiev’s characterization of other left formations in the mill were more sectarian

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than accurate. He wrote, for example, that all the other groups only sought union positions, which was not the case across the board. A leader of the STO, however, Carole Travis, became the president of her local.

His approach, in my view, appeared to be individualistic and self-promoting. He never mentioned the importance of coalitions nor did he seek any systematic way of improving work conditions or relationships between Black and white workers. His presence in the mill did not make a difference, although his writings on white privilege afterwards enlarged the national conversation on racism.

Emiliano:

I think there are a few great threads to pull with this question concerning Ignatiev's role in organizing Black, Latina/o, and women workers, combating racism, and the limits of the memoir genre in tackling this question.

Before diving into the rich ground of the two posed questions, I want to echo a point made by Steven Pitts in the last question. We are often left with snippets of information but not necessarily enough information. The genre of a memoir and even memory itself is a method of collecting history and learning about our past that is susceptible to a few crucial shortcomings. Memory is not inherently perfect. I cannot begin to emphasize how much I appreciate the comments and shared collective experiences and knowledge of everyone about this piece.

One of my chief criticisms about Ignatiev's memoir is the absence of some of these groups. For example, women within the mill are barely present. Additionally, Latina/o workers in the region are absent from his memoir. However, we know from contemporary accounts, such as David Ranney's *Living and Dying on the Factory Floor: From the Outside In and Inside Out*, which Ignatiev read and provided a blurb about, that the ethnic Mexican community is present and laboring in the Chicago/Calumet Region. Works like Gabriela F. Arredondo's Mexican Chicago and Ahmed White's The Last Great Strike reveal that the ethnic Mexican community in steel was one of the first to be completely unionized across this corner of the steel industry.

Their absence from the memoir could be a mix of things. As noted, Ignatiev did not place much emphasis on the union. However, for organizing and confronting policies detrimental to the Latina/o community of Northwest Indiana, the union was crucial. USWA established Comité de Hable Española (Spanish Speaking People's

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Committee), which, although short-lived, provided several benefits. The Spanish-language column in the local's newspaper informed the steelworkers about recent events, actions, and snippets of history about the labor movement. Although these columns and the effort to provide a completely bilingual paper to the Spanish-speaking steelworkers was not more encompassing, it showed a small step toward inclusion. Additionally, the committee became involved in the early urban renewal programs of the 1950s that disproportionally targeted primarily ethnic Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Black communities. Chairman Rufus Camacho also organized a campaign against the rent hike these groups faced from predatory landlords. And organizing here became important not just in the union hall, but in local *mutualistas* and churches. To an extent, the city and urban landscapes are missing in Ignatiev's recollections.

For brevity, I won't dive too much into the gendered aspects of the memoir. Unfortunately, much about women in steel is confined to chapter fourteen and comes off relatively dismissive. In describing the work of women, Ignatiev claimed that "none of the women had to work very hard." So too, the toxic passing comment about the Indigenous woman that Ignatiev claimed had feelings for him that he did not reciprocate. I don't think that, at least from what we are given in the memoir's recollections, Ignatiev made many plans to engage this demographic of the mill.

Similarly, I think that Ignatiev's own modesty or act of remembering leaves the memoir to read a bit too passively. As Roberta Wood mentioned, Ignatiev becomes "an observer, not an initiator" for the reader. And because of this, which for me becomes a bit frustrating at times, we are not quite sure what is strategic on his part and what is not (much as Ruth Needleman has pointed out). Moments where Ignatiev mentioned being "silent", seemed like a missed opportunity (not just to give the reader more details) but to actively engage, organize, or combat racism. His silence and commitment to observation seem a chief limitation with the details we are given.

Additionally, the omission of details also hinders our understanding of the limits. What previous conversation about race served as a breakthrough between Ignatiev and Slick that led him to tell us "I have won Slick's confidence"? Some insights, such as mentioning *The Calumet Insurgent Worker,* offer glances into some tactics, such as reprinting letters from Black workers, holding meetings in the church, and passing out leaflets at the mill's gates. Or when Ignatiev distributed his handwritten leaflet anonymously in areas where steelworkers would find them.

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However, I cannot help but wonder if engaging/expanding out from his department and making connections outside of his department would have offered just as an effective way to engage new individuals in these causes? We read a bit about meetings in the homes of workers and STO members. But the workscapes of the mill extend beyond the factory floor into the places where these workers eat, drink, worship, sleep, etc. With the absence of these places and stories about organizing, we are sometimes not given an accurate enough picture to know how effective Ignatiev and his contemporaries were.

Author

- 
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