REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

1994 American Historical Association Conference

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The 1995 American Historical Association's 109th annual meeting was held in Chicago. Many presenters touched on working-class issues, and panels that focused on working-class and labor history topics comprised 10 percent of the conference. Several sessions linked class analysis and labor questions to issues of gender and race. In "African American Activism in the South During the Roosevelt Era," the papers demonstrated the nexus between unions, economic conditions, and civil-rights activism. In "The Left, the Labor Movement, and the Transformation of the NAACP: Louisiana, 1933–1941," Adam Fairclough argued that the American Communist party helped to radicalize the black working class which in turn assisted the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in its civil-rights campaigns in the 1940s and 1950s. John Kirk's paper, "The Transformation of African American Protest in Arkansas, 1928–1942," characterized the increase in black protest as a function of the Great Depression and the desire for more assistance from the Roosevelt administration. The last paper of the panel, "African American Activism in the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union" (STFU) by Elizabeth Anne Payne, emphasized the cultural aspects of the STFU and how the farmers' union struggled to survive after joining the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

Eleven of the roughly 150 sessions specifically dealt with World War II. The session "The Effect of Race, Class and Gender on Post World War II Women" was comprised of three case studies. In "For the Duration: Gender, Race, and Technology in the Post-War Shipbuilding Industry," Deborah A. Hirschfield traced the effect of technology on shipbuilding, demonstrating how technological advances reshaped employment patterns on the wharfs, allowing white women production jobs "for the duration." African-American men and women struggled to obtain employment in the

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yards. Both unions and employers discriminated against blacks, which kept them from making wartime gains in the shipbuilding industries. "'These Women are Not Readily Readjusting to Prewar Standards as they Exist Here': American Indian Women in the Aftermath of World War II" by Grace Mary Gouveia focused on Native-American women in Wisconsin lumber mills. During the war, they assumed many of the mills' production responsibilities. Although the women lost their jobs after the war, the postwar period offered new economic opportunities for them. In her paper "Not Only for the Duration: Clubwomen in the Post–World War II Years," Julieanne A. Phillips argued that Cleveland clubwomen expanded their activities because of the home-front crises and that after 1945 they kept up their level of activism in the early Cold War period.

Yet another session that combined issues of labor and race featured the screening of "Going to Chicago," a film by George King chronicling the migration of African Americans from the South to the North from 1915 to 1965. Its focus on individuals makes it an excellent classroom tool for teaching the Great Migration, the formation of African-American communities, and issues of economic advancement and discrimination.

There were very few panels on the history of workers in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Only one panel, "Rethinking the African Working Class: The Colonial State and Labor in Post-War Africa, 1945–1960," dealt specifically with working-class history in any of the areas, featuring papers on the Sudan and Sierra Leone. Ahmad Sikainga's (Ohio State) "Post World War II Labor Unrest and the Remaking of the Sudanese Working Class" focused on attempts by the state and capital to create a more efficient, productive, and stable working class to meet the demands of the postwar economy. This process of remaking, which became the standard British imperial policy after 1945, involved the legalization of labor unions, the reorganization of work, and the provision of decent housing and social services. Sikainga's argument that the Sudanese working class mounted a series of resistance actions ranging from continuous strikes to the formation of independent unions is consistent with findings elsewhere on the continent. The Sudanese working class was not a pawn in the strategic designs of colonial officials but an active participant whose actions shaped the course of these reforms and determined their outcome.

The theme of active participation by workers in the process of their remaking was echoed in Ibrahim Abdullah's (University of North Carolina) paper, "The Remaking of the Sierra Leonean Working Class, 1945–1960." Abdullah discussed the measures undertaken by labor department officials (with support from the colonial state and London) to create a responsible and respectable working class and labor movement. The institutionalization of a bargaining machinery—Wages Board and Joint Industrial Council—to curtail excessive strike action and force workers and management to negotiate did not completely succeed in producing the right kind of labor movement which officials so badly desired. To the extent

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to which the new bargaining machinery was able to secure for workers the necessary economic advancements—increase in wages and better working conditions—they were willing to abide by the rules of the game.

But once it became apparent that employers were manipulating the new wage-fixing machinery to keep wages down, the rank and file insisted, with union support, on withdrawing their labor and demanding negotiation outside the established framework. The demand for direct negotiation undermined the regulatory function of the new machinery. And the generalized movement for increase in wages which eventually led to the 1955 strike witnessed the near collapse of the system. In the aftermath of the strike, state officials and later employers were persuaded to grant major concessions to workers and their unions which ultimately made the wage-fixing machinery useless. The workers and their unions were able to seize the initiative and negotiate with state officials and employers on their own terms.

Another panel on "Building Bridges: Comparative Working Class Attempts to Overcome Division, 1870s–1930s" included a paper on Africa entitled "Workers of all Colours Unite!: South African Communism, the White Working Class, and the Ideology of Proletarian Nonracialism, 1917–1943" by Pieter C. Van Duin (Leiden University). The paper examined the role of race in mobilizing workers against state and capital in South Africa. The policy of proletarian nonracialism supported by the Comintern before its dissolution in 1943 was problematic in the context of South Africa with its entrenched policy of racial segregation before apartheid. The Communist party's support for the notorious Rand Revolt in 1922—when white workers went on strike against attempts to relax the color bar which protected them against competition from black workers—on the grounds that the repeal of the color bar would not benefit the majority of black workers did not go down well with Africans. The party, with a predominantly white leadership, found itself implementing a rather ambiguous and opportunistic policy that in the end led to the party's alienation from white as well as black workers. In other panel papers, William A. Pelz (DePaul University) addressed tensions and contradictions within the German workers' movement. He illustrated how the Social Democratic party (SPD) ignored the diverse and conflicting identities of its constituency and instead understood workers as a homogenous group. Although this weakened the SPD, an important measure of working-class consciousness did develop and was maintained through the fascist era. Howard D. Lindsey (DePaul) focused on fragmentation in the U.S. automobile industry. Lindsey suggested that during the Depression Henry Ford sought to create a loyal black work force by providing financial aid to the predominantly black residents of Inkster, a village near Detroit, in return expecting residents to work at his River Rouge plant. This strategy was another method to encourage black workers to resist unionization.

"Rethinking the Home-Front: Women and Total War in France from

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the Revolution to World War II" was a well-attended session that provided a gendered discussion of work and the home front. Lisa DiCaprio (Rutgers University) demonstrated that women during the French Revolution played a critical role in home-front mobilization in salaried, volunteer, and requisitioned employment. Revolutionary working women also contributed to a shift in the conception of entitlements, insisting that these rights be based on citizenship and the right to subsistence. Mindy Jane Roseman (Columbia University) argued that World War I helped change the meaning and purpose of the French home as masculine anxiety equated the absence of women with a loss of home and nurturing. The government acted to replace this lost institution in part by relocating the site of childbirth and "active and vigilant tenderness" from home to maternity hospitals. Nicole Dombrowski (New York University) asserted that during World War II the French state's gendered view of war maintained women as dependent and war as men's business. This distinction between the home and the military front, between public and private space, neither recognized the need for civilian defense nor allowed women an active role. Dombrowski argued that women's exodus from Paris in 1940 did not make them agents of disorder but was a search for the protection that the government had failed to provide.

A session on "Social Constructions of Gender, Class, and Race: The YMCA AND YWCA" examined contests over the meaning of these concepts at the turn of the century. Paula Lupkin (University of Pennsylvania) discussed how businessmen invested in Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) buildings and chose architecture with the intention of promoting Christian manhood. Thomas Winter (University of Cincinnati) explored the class nature of concepts of manhood among YMCA leaders. They supported a working-class version of manhood that was self-sacrificing, thus fostering subordination and class harmony. Their version of middle-class manhood encouraged self-interest and leadership. Nancy Marie Robertson (New York University) analyzed the conflict between men and women over control of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), definitions of womanhood, and racial policies. Black and white women in the YWCA were concerned that a plan to include both men and women in the YMCA would deny them their independence and their ability to actively support racial cooperation.

A panel on "Agitational Theater and Popular Culture in the 1930s: Germany, the United States, and the Soviet Union" included three diverse papers on workers' theater. Richard Bodek (University of Charleston) brought a fresh reading to Bertolt Brecht's film *Kuhle Wampe,* suggesting Brecht's indebtedness to the proletarian public sphere and to the political theater, or agitprop, of Weimar culture. Bodek showed that the film's subject matter, which saw women and youth as the bearers of revolutionary ideology and stressed everyday issues like eviction, as well as the film's aesthetics and technique, represented elements adapted from agitprop.

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Lynn Mally (University of California, Irvine) focused on Soviet political theater during the first Five-Year Plan. She illustrated how these performances proved valuable to the government as a means of communication while providing the audience a forum for addressing the concerns of daily life. The government, however, turned against agitprop at the end of the plan, targeting both the form of the presentation in favor of social realism and agitprop's critical political stance. Colette Hyman (Winona State University) examined workers' theater in the United States. As part of a larger insurgent labor movement, workers' theater of the 1930s became a weapon in the struggle to educate and organize workers. Hyman showed that the purpose of labor-oriented theater has shifted over the past twenty years and has become a tool with which to revive labor history and politicize and empower workers by advancing an alternate historical perspective.

Finally, a panel titled "The Postwar Social Contract: Perspectives from France, Germany, Japan, and the United States" brought together Irwin Wall, Volker Berghahn, Andrew Gordon, David Stebenne, and Charles Maier under the able chair of Nicole Jordan. The panel was unusual in the cohesion and similarity in perspective of the papers. David Stebenne, in conceiving it, posed specific questions for each participant to answer: Was there a social contract, what were its terms, what role did the Americans play in it, and how did it compare to the experience of other countries? The result was a step toward a genuine comparative history, appreciated as such by a participating audience.

Wall began by arguing that France did indeed have a social contract, despite the antisystem rhetoric of its major communist-dominated trade union, the CGT. From 1945 to 1947, when the communists participated in the government, an explicit contract was based on shared power. After the break of 1947, union leaders were excluded from management roles and the state imposed a new contract based on wage increases tied to productivity gains. Rapid economic growth, according to Wall, matched by generous pay increases and welfare state benefits, won the grudging, tacit assent of the Christian and reformist unions while capturing the rank and file of the CGT as well and marginalized the communists to a futile political role of collecting signatures against the atomic bomb. The American role in all this was minimal; Marshall Plan assistance made the contract easier to achieve, but the French would probably have imposed it anyway.

Volker Berghahn noted that *Mitbestimmung* was rooted in the experience of the 1920s in Germany and was believed to offer the proverbial "third way" between capitalism and communism; its failure in the postwar era is usually attributed to the combined influence of the employers and the American occupation. But a powerful wing of the labor movement also preferred a Keynesian and consumerist welfare state to codetermination, and it was actively assisted by the American military government and the foreign mission of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The United States succeeded in transferring its productivity message to Europe, Berg-

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hahn said, validating the Maier thesis but also criticizing it for its neglect of the role of women, who were brought into the contract through their passive role as consumers. Andrew Gordon noted the commonality of postwar settlements under the American umbrella, but attributed to Japan the most "perfect" or durable contract of the postwar era; a consensus on the shared benefits of increased productivity was actively promoted by an emerging and soon-dominant wing of the labor movement in the 1950s, while the exclusion of women from the terms of the contract reinforced traditional gender roles. Labor–management consultations resulted in quality controls unique in modern industry, which Gordon attributed to the presence of technical experts on the front line of the industrial process alongside their workers. Only later did the Japanese separate their engineers and technicians under American influence. David Stebenne put the steel industry at the center of the American contract, giving it a "model" role for other industries; in the late 1940s labor abandoned any role in management in exchange for the link of wages to productivity, as unions and bosses sought an end to conflict under the influence of a shared anti-Sovietism. Unlike France, labor was actively involved from the beginning and the contract was in no sense imposed; but more than anywhere in the European experience, the American contract was based on exclusion, not only of women and minorities, but even of white males in underprivileged regions such as the South. It thus varied by race, gender, and region, but benefited from the prestige enjoyed by American businessmen as compared to the reduced role management was able to play in the defeated nations of Europe.

Charles Maier challenged the panel for its "bloodless" depiction of a seemingly inevitable process and wondered whether the American postwar hegemony which made the contracts possible was really necessary; the U.S. government and labor movement could have just as easily returned to isolationism. He stressed that management in all countries was as divided as the labor movement, and while accepting the criticism that his productivity thesis had neglected the role of women, doubted that consumerism was an adequate recompense for their loss of empowerment before the 1960s. Maier stressed the decomposition of the contract since 1973 under the impact of recession and offered the view that recognized boundaries of the postwar era—whether between labor and management, men and women, First and Third Worlds, or even democracy and fascism—were becoming blurred. He wondered whether the "short twentieth century" of 1914–1991 was an adequate conceptualization of our era. Should we not think of an industrial century from the 1850s through the 1960s, with the social contract and spectacular growth of the period 1947–1973 as capitalism's last reprieve? The end of "Fordism" and the advent of postindustrial society have created the contours of a new society whose characteristics remain unknown.

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