SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

Class, Race and Democracy in the CIO: The "New" Labor History Meets the "Wages of Whiteness"

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In the writing of American history, the last several years have seen a significant outpouring of scholarship focusing on the relationship between class and race in American society. The starting-point of much of this scholarship has been the "new labor history" that had its origins in E.P. Thompson's pathbreaking study of the making of the English working class, and in Herbert Gutman's creative application of Thompson's insights and methods to the American context. For other scholars the starting-point has been African-American history, and the result has been a fruitful exploration of the role of black workers within the black community and the larger society. Cumulatively, this scholarship has had enormous implications for the study of class in American history. To put the matter bluntly: the long overdue study of the intersection of class and race has called into question some of our most cherished assumptions about class.[1]

Since this essay will be critical of the new labor history, let me hasten to acknowledge that my own development as a historian has been squarely within that tradition. My first book, *Workers on the Waterfront*,

[1] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963). For anthologies of Gutman's writings, see Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York, 1976); idem, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, ed. Ira Berlin (New York, 1987). Important examples of the new scholarship on black workers include Joe William Trotter, Jr, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1914–45* (Urbana, 1985); idem, *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915–32* (Urbana, 1990); Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley, 1991); Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863–1923* (New York, 1991); idem, "Following the Color Line of Labor: Black Workers and the Labor Movement before 1930", *Radical History Review*, 55 (1993), pp. 43–87; Robin D.G. Kelley, "'We Are Not What We Seem': Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South", *Journal of American History*, 80 (1993), pp. 75–112; idem, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994); Tera W. Hunter, *To "Joy My Freedom": Women Workers' Odyssey of Hope and Struggle in the Postwar Urban South* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

published in 1988, was an attempt to apply Thompson's insights to the American working class in the twentieth century. A study of the development of unionism among maritime workers on the West Coast of the United States, it affirmed that the *logic* of working people's experience pushes them toward a widening sense of solidarity and, at particular historical moments like the 1930s, toward *class* consciousness. But in the last few years my own research, and my reading of the work of other scholars, has persuaded me that when we take full account of race as a component of the historical experience and identity of American workers, it calls into question one of the premises that has been central to much of the new labor history – namely, the belief in the emergent reality of one working class, with a natural affinity toward solidarity and the capacity to develop a unified consciousness as a weapon of struggle.[2]

Ironically, the new labor history equipped us with the tools to make such a judgement much earlier. Beginning with Thompson, above all with his frequently quoted introduction to *The Making of the English Working Class*, the focus of our study of class shifted from a notion that saw class formation, and class consciousness, as a reactive by-product of industrialization to a premise that restored an active and creative role to working people in the shaping not only of their own consciousness but of the larger society. Thompson struck a telling blow at the mainstream of Marxist thought, which had smothered history in mechanistic formulas and teleological certainties. But in applying Thompson's insights, in affirming the agency of working people and the autonomy of their consciousness and culture, Thompson's heirs were too often content with traditional Marxist formulas which suggested that every racial barrier was – to quote Oliver Cox – "a barrier put up between white and black people by their employers". Somehow, according to this view, agency – and responsibility – always lay with forces external to the working class, and working people were either bullied into submission or duped into denying their true class interests. In his brilliant new departure, a book entitled *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, David Roediger rejects Cox's mechanistic formulation and reminds labor historians of the illogic of denying agency and autonomy to workers in relation to questions of race. Roediger calls upon historians "to explore working class 'whiteness' and white supremacy as creations, in part, of the white working class itself".[3]

Roediger is by no means alone in staking out such a position. In the last decade, Herbert Hill, Robin Kelley, Earl Lewis, Robert Norrell,

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[2] Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana, 1988), pp. 3–4.
[3] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 9–13; Oliver Cromwell Cox, *Caste, Class, and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (1948; rpt. New York, 1970), p. 470; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991), p. 9.

Alexander Saxton and Joe Trotter have drawn similar conclusions.[4] Together, the work of these scholars raises a number of far-reaching questions: how great a role did white workers play in constructing and maintaining the multilayered edifice of racial inequality, in the labor market and the larger society? Did white workers have a material, as well as psychological, stake in the subordination of African Americans, or were they "committing suicide from the standpoint of their material self-interest" when they refused to extend the hand of solidarity to blacks?[5] What role have trade unions played in reinforcing – or, conversely, breaching – the lines of racially-based inequality? Did the Left, especially the Communist party, offer a consistent challenge to patterns of white privilege, or were even Communists deterred by white workers' insistence upon maintaining the wages of whiteness? And finally, what has been the relationship between trade union leaders and the rank and file on questions of race? Has the historical record reflected mainly the cautious and class collaborationist character of the trade union leadership or the "democratic" will of the white majority in the ranks of organized labor? In this essay, I will attempt to answer, or at least address, these questions, and then suggest a number of areas where the debate they have sparked needs to be broadened and refined.

Most of my focus will be on the CIO era – the years from the mid-1930s through the late 1940s – when the unions affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations emerged as formidable challengers to the relatively conservative, narrowly job-conscious, and – often – unashamedly racist unionism of the American Federation of Labor. Given the inclusive character of industrial labor markets, CIO leaders knew instinctively that they had to organize blacks as well as whites if their unions were to survive. Moreover, the presence of a substantial

[4] Herbert Hill, "Race, Ethnicity and Organized Labor: The Opposition to Affirmative Action", *New Politics*, new ser., 1 (1987), pp. 31–82; idem, "Black Workers, Organized Labor, and Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act: Legislative History and Litigation Record", in Herbert Hill and James E. Jones, Jr (eds), *Race in America: The Struggle for Equality* (Madison, 1993), pp. 263–341; Robert J. Norrell, "Caste in Steel: Jim Crow Careers in Birmingham, Alabama", *Journal of American History*, 73 (1986), pp. 669–694; idem, "Labor at the Ballot Box: Alabama Politics from the New Deal to the Dixiecrat Movement", *Journal of Southern History*, 57 (1991), pp. 201–234; David Roediger, "Labor in White Skin: Race and Working Class History", in Mike Davis and Michael Sprinkler (eds), *Reshaping the US Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980s* (London, 1988), pp. 287–308; Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London, 1990), esp. pp. 293–319. For the work of Kelley, Lewis and Trotter, see the citations in note 1 above. See also Eric Arnesen, "'Like Banquo's Ghost, It Will Not Down': The Race Question and the American Railroad Brotherhoods, 1880–1920", *American Historical Review*, 99 (1994), pp. 1601–1633; Henry M. McKiven, Jr, *Iron and Steel: Class, Race, and Community in Birmingham, Alabama, 1875–1920* (Chapel Hill, 1995).

[5] Michael Goldfield, "Race and the CIO: Reply to Critics", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 46 (1994), p. 148.

left-wing cadre in the new federation meant that sections of the CIO had a deep ideological commitment to the goal of racial equality. When the CIO launched organizing campaigns in the steel, meatpacking, and automobile industries, its leadership took special pains to reach out to black workers and often succeeded in winning their allegiance. Nelson Lichtenstein points out that at the giant Ford River Rouge complex in Dearborn, Michigan, "the process of unionization worked an enormous transformation in the consciousness of [black] workers", many of whom had scabbed during the United Auto Workers' epic strike against Ford in 1941. "For the next decade at least, the Rouge foundry [where most black workers were concentrated] was the center of civil rights militancy in the Detroit area." In Chicago, according to Lizabeth Cohen, "Blacks responded with tremendous enthusiasm to the CIO's drive. Everywhere, organizers reported that blacks were among the first to rally to union campaigns." Cohen concludes that while "the CIO hardly created a racially integrated society, [. . .] it went further in promoting racial harmony than any other institution in existence at the time".[6]

Beyond the workplace, the social dynamism of the new labor federation raised hopes that it would help reshape the political environment and take the lead in building a social-democratic welfare state comparable to the model that eventually emerged in post-war Europe. The social legislation of the New Deal; the breathtaking expansion of organized labor's institutional power, based on a union membership of nearly fifteen million by the end of World War II; the efforts of labor liberals and social democrats within the CIO and the Roosevelt and Truman administrations to create tripartite instruments of industrial governance that could lay the groundwork for a more just and egalitarian society – all of this seemed to prefigure the coming of an American social democracy.

Although race was not the centerpiece of the social democrats' agenda, it was necessarily integral to their plans to transform the American political landscape and with it the larger society. For the force that stood in the way of the extension of the New Deal was the political alliance of northern capital (overwhelmingly aligned with the Republican party) and the southern planter elite whose southern Democratic political allies wielded disproportionate power in Congress through their control of the most powerful committees of the House and Senate. These "Dixiecrats" accepted federal aid when it benefited their constituents, but more often opposed federal intervention in the South because they feared it would serve as a wedge to undermine the racial segregation and disfranchisement that were so essential to the continuation of the

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[6] Nelson Lichtenstein, "Life at the Rouge: A Cycle of Workers' Control", in Charles Stephenson and Robert Asher (eds), *Life and Labor: Dimensions of Working-Class History* (Albany, 1986), p. 245; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 335, 337.

plantation-based social order. To fulfill their hopes, then, the New Dealers had to break the power of the Dixiecrats by spreading the franchise to blacks and to the large numbers of plebeian whites who had been shut out of southern politics. And to achieve its goal of organizing the unorganized, as well as to protect unionized workers in the North from the threat of "runaway shops", the CIO had to succeed in its ambitious post-war campaign to organize industrial workers throughout the South. In both cases the great wall of racial division had to be breached. In both cases the forces of reform failed.[7]

In explaining why, there has been an understandable tendency among historians to blame external factors such as the Cold War and McCarthyism for undermining the social democrats' agenda and halting the forward march of labor. Historians have also criticized the leadership of the CIO for capitulating to the McCarthyite wave of reaction by expelling eleven CIO unions on the charge that they were "Communist-dominated". Studies of the CIO in the South have pointed out that the expulsion of the Left-led unions meant the crippling of those organizations that had played the most dynamic role in fighting for the rights of black workers and for the goal of racial equality. In an important book entitled *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers*, Michael Honey points out that black workers responded most enthusiastically to the unionism of the CIO, and that "black support and leftist leadership proved the key to success in many of the places where the CIO excelled". But continued black enthusiasm for the CIO was contingent upon the organization's willingness to address the question of equal rights – on the job, within the unions, and in the larger society. Honey criticizes CIO strategy in Memphis precisely because it "sought to keep questions of equal rights in the background, emphasizing instead the goal of gaining collective bargaining rights". Whereas the CIO's opponents accused it of being "radical", Honey charges that "in reality it was not radical enough". Indeed, when CIO leaders banned Communists from the Operation Dixie organizing staff and limited the role of blacks in the campaign, they were guilty, says Honey, of "crippl[ing] the whole movement for change in the South".[8]

[7] Nelson Lichtenstein, "From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclipse of Social Democracy in the Postwar Era", in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (eds), *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980* (Princeton, 1989), pp. 122–152; Ira Katznelson, "Was the Great Society a Lost Opportunity?", in *ibid.*, pp. 185–211; Margaret Weir, Ann Shola Orloff and Theda Skocpol (eds), *The Politics of Social Policy in the United States* (Princeton, 1988). On the failure of Operation Dixie, see Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia, 1988); Michael Honey and Samuel Barkin, "'Operation Dixie': Two Points of View", *Labor History*, 31 (1990), pp. 373–385; and the excellent summation in Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955* (Chapel Hill, 1995), pp. 227–241.
[8] Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement", *Journal of American History*, 75 (1988),

But the logic of Honey's analysis points in quite another direction, because hopes for social transformation depended on the joint – or at least parallel – mobilization of black and white workers north and south, with the South as the critical, and most uncertain, arena. In the South, blacks often embraced industrial unionism far more readily than their white counterparts. Honey's study of Memphis demonstrates this important fact again and again, as does my own examination of race relations among shipyard workers in Mobile, Jacksonville, Savannah, and other southern ports. In Jacksonville, a union organizer admitted that "fully nine-tenths of the CIO vote in [a key shipyard] election came from the Negro workers who voted in one big solid bloc". In steel, one Birmingham area unionist recalled that "the negroes were the first to join [the union], and then they were the stickers". From the CIO's standpoint, however, this was a mixed blessing. As an Alabama organizer put it, "If it looked to the whites like you had a black union and you wanted them to join it, you'd be dead. They wouldn't do it." Even more pointedly, the editor of the CIO's newspaper in Alabama acknowledged that "down here no one can afford to be called a nigger lover".[9]

The CIO worked hard to convince whites of the practical necessity of joining with blacks in interracial unions, and many whites eventually came around. But often they supported the unions only when they became convinced that doing so would not jeopardize their superior position in a racially segmented labor market. The contracts and seniority agreements negotiated by the CIO tended to institutionalize – and sometimes to increase – these inequalities. In Memphis, for example, at the Firestone Tire and Rubber plant, the disparity between blacks' and whites' wages "increased dramatically after unionization". In Birmingham, at the mills of the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company (TCI), Robert J. Norrell observes that "TCI and the Steelworkers' locals agreed to a system of segregated lines of promotion that preserved white supremacy and expanded the seniority rights of white workers. Whites could 'bid' up and 'bump' down the line of promotion within an all-white seniority unit. Black laborers were put on occupational ladders that led nowhere." Overall, in the new CIO unions, Honey points to "a stormy and continuing confrontation [. . .] over the meaning of trade unionism – with blacks wanting to use the union to

pp. 786–811; Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana, 1993), pp. 213, 227, 230, 283.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 83, 155, 163–164, 171, 179–184, 226–227; Bruce Nelson, "Organized Labor and the Struggle for Black Equality in Mobile during World War II", *Journal of American History*, 80 (1993), p. 976; Philip Taft, *Organizing Dixie: Alabama Workers in the Industrial Era* (Westport, 1981), p. 106; Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor*, p. 79; Norrell, "Caste in Steel", p. 680.

batter down segregation and many whites wanting to use it to keep segregation in place".[10]

How, in these circumstances, could there be working-class unity, even within the CIO (whose unions overall constituted a liberal minority within a larger labor movement that was generally conservative at best where questions of race were concerned)? The circumstances engendered by World War II and the immediate post-war years tended to quicken the pace of black demands for change and thereby to intensify white resistance. The breadth and depth of this backlash provides overwhelming evidence that the great majority of white workers were unwilling to unite with African Americans around a program that would have challenged deeply-rooted patterns of racial inequality in factory, mine and mill, as well as in the larger society.[11]

But this doesn't mean that white workers were – always and everywhere – hostile to the activity and agenda of their black counterparts. In the South, especially in unions such as the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers (FTA), whose leaders were either members of or closely aligned with the Communist party and whose southern membership was composed largely of African Americans, there were important instances of black-white cooperation. In a moving personal memoir of his years as an organizer for the FTA in the South, Karl Korstad has recalled organizing campaigns and strikes where blacks and whites sat together at meetings and walked together on picket lines that they integrated spontaneously. Korstad points out, moreover, that even when whites refused to cooperate with the FTA, it could be more an expression of fear and inertia than of racial antagonism. He spent a year in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, trying to persuade white workers at the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company to join an FTA local whose membership was overwhelmingly black. "I seldom met with strong antagonism," he recalls. "Talked to alone, most of the [white] Reynolds workers thought FTA had helped them, even if they weren't members." But they expressed little faith in the willingness of other whites to join the union, and – in the face of company repression – they feared for their jobs. The union's failure to enroll more than a "few hundred" white workers out of the thousands at R.J. Reynolds was a major factor in its demise. In the increasingly hostile climate of the post-war era,

[10] Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights*, pp. 201, 280; Norrell, "Caste in Steel", p. 677.

[11] In a similar critique of Honey's argument, George Fredrickson concludes that "the effort to create a unified black-and-white labor movement in the South was doomed from the start, and anti-communism was simply a convenient vehicle for the expression of the deeply rooted white supremacist convictions that white workers shared with their employers". George M. Fredrickson, "Red, Black, and White", *New York Review of Books*, 8 June 1995, pp. 33–35, 38, quoted on p. 35.

the FTA local in Winston-Salem was torn apart by a combination of corporate intransigence, hostile state intervention, and competition from other unions. Blacks clung tenaciously to what had clearly become *their* organization, but whites opted for the FTA's rivals or for no union at all.[12]

Korstad reminds us that white southerners' attitudes toward black demands for a greater measure of equality were not monolithic; there was support and ambivalence as well as hostility. However, our analysis must be based, finally, upon the attitudes and behavior of the majority of workers, and upon a definition of racism that – in David Wellman's words – "extends considerably beyond prejudiced beliefs. The essential feature of racism," Wellman argues, "is not hostility or misperception, but rather the defense of a system from which advantage is derived on the basis of race." As the post-war civil rights movement emerged and offered an unprecedented challenge to the material and psychological advantages that derived from the wages of whiteness, "massive resistance" became the norm among white southerners and, eventually, among many white northerners as well. To be sure, a "national consensus" on behalf of racial change developed in the spring and summer of 1963, and this dramatic shift in racial attitudes made possible the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But the "national consensus" was in reality a *northern white* consensus about change *in the South*, not about the redistribution of society's resources in ways that would compromise white advantage in the North.[13]

In this regard, there was often little to distinguish white workers in the North from their counterparts in the South, even in CIO unions led by labor liberals or Communists. The International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), for example, had a leadership that was closely aligned with the Communist party. During the 1930s, rank-and-file longshoremen had won an extraordinary degree of control of the work process on the waterfronts of the Pacific Coast, and had actively supported the leadership's calls for political action at the point of production to support the embattled Spanish Republic and to protest fascist Japan's aggression against China. This generation of "'34 men", so called because

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[12] Karl Korstad, "Black and White Together: Organizing in the South with the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural & Allied Workers Union (FTA-CIO), 1946–1952", in Steve Rosswurm (ed.), *The CIO's Left-Led Unions* (New Brunswick, 1992), pp. 69–94, quoted on pp. 88, 94. See also Alan Draper, *Conflict of Interests: Organized Labor and the Civil Rights Movement in the South, 1954–1968* (Ithaca, 1994), p. 12.

[13] David T. Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1993), p. 210. On the character and limits of the northern white consensus on behalf of racial change in the mid-1960s, see Jack M. Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington, 1987), pp. 155–213; and Gary Orfield, "Race and the Liberal Agenda: The Loss of the Integrationist Dream, 1965–1974", in Weir *et al.*, The Politics of Social Policy in the United States, pp. 313–355.

they had forged new instruments of rank-and-file democracy during a bitterly fought maritime strike in 1934, was widely celebrated on the Left at the time, and that tone was reflected in my own book on the 1930s as well as in Howard Kimeldorf's study of "the making of radical and conservative unions on the waterfront".[14]

But a recent essay on the ILWU during World War II by Nancy Quam-Wickham clearly demonstrates that the tradition of rank-and-file insurgency could be reactionary as well as progressive, even among the famed "generation of '34". During the 1930s, the ILWU longshore division's overwhelmingly white membership had largely acquiesced in the leadership's advocacy of racial equality. However, in the context of the Great Depression, there had been no influx of new workers of any race or nationality; the issue within the union had been more rhetorical than substantive. But during the war the vast expansion of production on the "home front" required the hiring of many new workers on the waterfront, for the first time in a generation. And many of the new workers on the docks were African Americans, including experienced longshoremen who had migrated north and westward from port cities on the Gulf of Mexico. Quam-Wickham points out that many ILWU members, including veteran longshoremen, "sought to protect the gains of the 1930s by preventing new workers from enjoying those very same benefits. In this context, rank-and-filism meant racism." In spite of its strong opposition to racial discrimination, the ILWU leadership's response to this problem was cautious, and sometimes no more than rhetorical; for, as Quam-Wickham observes, aggressively attacking racism "would have meant attacking the rank-and-file members and [their] control at the point of production".[15]

The record of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) among workers on New York City's subway and bus systems was similar to that of the ILWU's longshore division on the West Coast. Rhetorically, the TWU's left-wing leaders, especially President Michael ("Red Mike") Quill, demonstrated a strong commitment to the struggle for black equality. But in practice the union's record was far more ambiguous, in large measure because its membership was overwhelmingly white, Irish and Catholic. According to Joshua Freeman, "Irish community life and Irish culture permeated the [transit] industry" and the TWU in New York. Given

[14] Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*; Howard Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets? The Making of Radical and Conservative Unions on the Waterfront* (Berkeley, 1988).

[15] Nancy Quam-Wickham, "Who Controls the Hiring Hall? The Struggle for Job Control in the ILWU during World War II", in Rosswurm, *The CIO's Left-Led Unions*, p. 67. I have expanded on this theme at length in "Harry Bridges, the ILWU, and Race Relations in the CIO Era", Working Paper No. 2, Occasional Paper Series, Center for Labor Studies, University of Washington (Seattle, 1995); and at greater length in "The 'Lords of the Docks' Reconsidered: Race Relations among West Coast Longshoremen, 1933–1961", in Calvin Winslow (ed.), *Essays in Waterfront Labor History* (Urbana, forthcoming).

the historic tensions between African Americans and Irish immigrants, it is not surprising that one of the union's Communist cadre recalled that "the problem [of racial discrimination] was so overwhelming that you couldn't win". More optimistically, the leadership claimed in 1938 to be "fighting discrimination successfully but not miraculously". Its clear priority, however, was institutional self-preservation, and this meant treading carefully on issues of race. "Many white TWU members did not want to work with or compete for jobs with blacks", Freeman concludes; and "many TWU leaders feared that if the union took a visible lead in fighting against discrimination a membership revolt would ensue". Thus, the impetus for confronting the stark realities of racial stratification and exclusion in the transit industry came far less from the union leadership than from New York's black community and, eventually, the federal government.[16]

The United Auto Workers (UAW) was a far bigger union than the ILWU or the TWU. It was concentrated in the industrial Midwest but included local unions in many southern cities as well. The UAW's president, Walter Reuther, was perhaps the nation's best-known labor liberal, and he lent his own and his union's voice to the advocacy of racial equality. But with a membership that was mainly white, and a long tradition of shop-floor activism that was not easily extinguishable, Reuther also had to tread carefully on the issue of race. Increasingly, he made the UAW into an important ally of the emerging civil rights lobby at the national level. But he was reluctant to challenge the racial inequalities that persisted within the auto industry's occupational structure, because he recognized that many whites were committed to defending their jobs and their social space within the plants against what they perceived as black encroachment. In his excellent study of the United Auto Workers and American liberalism, Kevin Boyle concludes that "on the most basic level, white rank-and-filers insisted that they had the right to determine beside whom they worked, a right they protected through the workplace action that had been the hallmark of

[16] Nelson, "Harry Bridges, the ILWU, and Race Relations in the CIO Era", p. 17. On the TWU, see Joshua B. Freeman, *In Transit: The Transport Workers Union in New York City, 1933–1966* (New York, 1989), pp. 26–27, 30, 154–156; and August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, "Communist Unions and the Black Community: the Case of the Transport Workers Union, 1934–1944", *Labor History*, 23 (1982), pp. 165–197. Meier and Rudwick conclude, "The TWU's early history demonstrates that the response of a Communist-dominated union leadership to race discrimination in the job market was anything but simple. That leadership, regardless of its ideals, was dependent for survival in office on a white membership characterized by pervasive prejudices": *ibid.*, p. 195. See also Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana, 1983), p. 265; and Alex Lichtenstein, "Labor Radicalism, Race Relations, and Anticommunism in Miami During the 1940s" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Washington, DC, 30 March 1995), a study of the TWU's largest local outside New York City.

the early UAW". He cites a number of "hate" strikes, and other major incidents of racial harassment, that occurred well into the post-war period in northern cities such as Detroit, Cleveland and Toledo.[17]

One of the best recent studies of the UAW's autoworker constituency has taken us beyond the shop floor and the union hall to examine politics at the municipal level and to explore how homeownership and a racialized commitment to family and neighborhood have been integral to the identity of working-class whites. In a powerful refutation of those political commentators who have argued that "white backlash" as a national phenomenon developed mainly in response to ghetto rebellions and Black Power in the middle and late 1960s, Thomas Sugrue demonstrates that racial polarization shaped local politics in the urban North "well before the tumult of the 1960s". Sugrue focuses on Detroit, which had a huge bloc of white autoworkers concentrated in many of the city's residential neighborhoods. Between 1943 and 1965, whites in Detroit created at least 192 neighborhood organizations throughout the city. Their purpose, as one homeowners' association put it, was "to resist any encroachment tending to weaken the unity of the community or lower property values" – in other words, to keep their neighborhoods white.[18]

Housing issues – from the building of public housing projects away from the bursting black ghetto to open housing ordinances and the larger themes of "black invasion" and "white flight" – became central to Detroit municipal politics in the 1940s and 1950s. The UAW leadership took a strong stand against racial discrimination in housing, and the

[17] Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945–1968* (Ithaca, 1995), pp. 107–131, quoted on p. 117. In a recent article, Boyle offers a more positive, numerically precise, and formulaic assessment of the UAW's record. He states that "when the International enjoyed substantial leverage over its regional staff and local officials, it broke the color line, though political considerations often dictated just how quickly it did so. When the International did not enjoy such leverage [i.e. in the Deep South, and among skilled tradesmen], the color line remained intact." Boyle estimates that workers in the Deep South constituted 5 per cent of the UAW membership; and skilled tradesmen, 15 per cent: Kevin Boyle, "'There Are No Union Sorrows that the Union Can't Heal': The Struggle for Racial Equality in the United Auto Workers, 1940–1960", *Labor History*, 36 (1995), pp. 5–23, quoted on p. 17. For a critical portrayal of the UAW's record on race at Chrysler's Dodge Main plant in Hamtramck, Michigan, during the Reuther era, see Steve Jefferys, *Management and Managed: Fifty Years of Crisis at Chrysler* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 162–187.
[18] Thomas J. Sugrue, "Crabgrass-Roots Politics: Race, Rights, and the Reaction against Liberalism in the Urban North, 1940–1964", *Journal of American History*, 82 (1995), pp. 551–578, quoted on p. 578; idem, "The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race, Industrial Decline, and Housing in Detroit, 1940–1960" (Ph.D., Harvard University, 1992), p. 185. Arnold R. Hirsch offers an equally powerful refutation of the conventional wisdom on the origins of white backlash in the North in "Massive Resistance in the Urban North: Trumbull Park, Chicago, 1953–1966", *Journal of American History*, 82 (1995), pp. 522–550.

union became deeply involved in mayoralty campaigns which revolved largely around housing issues, even running its own candidates for mayor in 1945 and 1949. But the results were disastrous, not only because the progressive candidates and issues were soundly defeated but because many autoworkers ignored their union's advice and voted – sometimes by a two to one margin – for segregationist Democrats and conservative Republicans. According to Sugrue, these politicians and their organized supporters in the white neighborhoods of Detroit and other northern cities used language very much like that which George Wallace, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan would later adopt in their appeals to disaffected working-class whites.[19]

After the victory of Albert Cobo – a corporate executive, real estate investor, and Republican opponent of open housing – in 1949, one UAW official reflected, "I think in these elections we are dealing with people who have a middle class mentality. Even in our own UAW, the member is either buying a home, owns a home, or is going to buy one." What he left unsaid was that the "middle class mentality" of white UAW members reinforced their determination to keep their neighborhood white, even though that meant excluding autoworkers and UAW members who happened to be black. This was borne out, with devastating clarity, in sociologist Arthur Kornhauser's *Detroit as the People See It*, which concluded in 1952 that "CIO members were even more likely than other white Detroiters to express negative views of African Americans". Sixty-five per cent of the CIO members Kornhauser surveyed were opposed to "full racial equality", while 18 per cent were in favor of it. Facing this kind of opposition from his own membership, Walter Reuther nonetheless continued to support the struggle for black equality, at the municipal, state and national levels. But after more than a decade of stinging defeats, the UAW retreated from the pursuit of labor politics in the Motor City and, in attacking the wages of whiteness on the shop floor, Reuther learned to spend his political capital carefully.[20]

The uneven record of Reuther, Bridges, Quill and their unions does not suggest for a moment that leadership did not matter, or that the force of white resistance to the demand for racial equality was monolithic and irresistible. Leadership could, and often did, make a major difference in the way CIO unions accommodated the pressures that came from different sectors of their membership. Perhaps the most significant example is the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA), an organization with a far-flung white majority and a substantial black minority that was represented throughout much of the UPWA's jurisdic-

[19] Sugrue, "Crabgrass-Roots Politics", p. 578.
[20] *Ibid.*, quoted on pp. 571, 556; Arthur Kornhauser, *Detroit as the People See It: A Survey of Attitudes in an Industrial City* (Detroit, 1952), pp. 87, 90, 91.

tion but concentrated at the heart of the union's strength, in the stock-yards and packinghouses of Chicago. The UPWA also had a left-wing leadership, but one that – overall – was independent enough of the Communist party to survive the purges that racked the CIO in the late 1940s. The combination of an aggressive left-wing leadership and a strategically-located, equally aggressive black minority led to remarkable achievements in the realm of civil rights.

In a study of a UPWA local in Fort Worth, Texas, Rick Halpern demonstrates how the combined force of the international union leadership and local black activism, spurred largely by the militancy of younger workers who were veterans of World War II, brought about dramatic changes in race relations in the local union and at the Armour plant in Fort Worth. In 1952, the union leadership forced a reluctant local management to implement the terms of a provision in the national contract mandating the desegregation of all plant facilities; it also confronted – and defeated – the rebellion of a white, segregationist "Local Rights Committee" that was determined to block the implementation of the contract's anti-discrimination clause. The leadership's victory marked a turning-point in the UPWA's history, but it came at a price. In Fort Worth, as black and Hispanic activists virtually took over the local, elected people of color to leadership positions, and pushed the union toward an even stronger stand on civil rights, the white majority became more and more passive. Most whites retained their union membership but stopped participating in the local's affairs. Faced with the same pressures, a number of other locals withdrew from the UPWA. But spurred on by the concentrated force of the black rank and file in Chicago, the union leadership never wavered in its commitment to civil rights and still managed to hold most of the organization intact. In no other CIO affiliate did a union with a white majority take such a strong, and uncompromising, stand on behalf of racial equality, on the job as well as within the larger society. In evaluating this remarkable record, Halpern is unequivocal in concluding that "for a twenty-year period [. . .] the weight of the international union was the determining factor in establishing the rights and relationships of white and black workers".[21]

The UPWA was unusual, perhaps unique, among CIO unions in its civil rights record. But Halpern's study of the Fort Worth Packinghouse

[21] Nelson, "Harry Bridges, the ILWU, and Race Relations in the CIO Era", pp. 16–17; Rick Halpern, "Interracial Unionism in the Southwest: Fort Worth's Packinghouse Workers, 1937–1954", in Robert Zieger (ed.), *Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South* (Knoxville, 1991), pp. 158–182, quoted on p. 176. See also Rick Halpern, "The CIO and the Limits of Labor-based Civil Rights Activism: The Case of Louisiana's Sugar Workers, 1947–1966" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Washington, DC, 30 March 1995); and idem, *Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago's Packinghouses, 1904–1954* (Urbana, forthcoming).

Workers has broader implications and raises a vitally important question about the relationship between leadership and rank and file in regard to questions of race. There has been a tendency in the new labor history, especially in studies of the twentieth century, to see rank-and-file activism as an inherently progressive phenomenon and as a necessary antidote to the increasingly conservative and bureaucratic character of union leaderships. This view undergirds a recent article by Michael Goldfield entitled "Race and the CIO: The Possibilities for Racial Egalitarianism during the 1930s and 1940s". Goldfield argues that the "stifl[ing]" of "opportunities for democratic rank-and-file influence" in unions such as the UAW and the United Steelworkers accounts for what he regards as their shabby record on questions of race. But in important respects his formulation stands the historical reality on its head; for when we take race into account, the unionism of the white rank and file seldom looks progressive, and "rank-and-file democracy" often becomes a means of protecting the position of the white majority against perceived threats from the black minority.[22]

As the civil rights movement emerged, or reemerged, in the mid-1950s and began to challenge racial discrimination in every phase of American life, contemporaries did not hesitate to point out that the leadership of the newly-merged AFL-CIO, and its advocacy of racial equality, was encountering massive resistance from "hundreds of thousands of [white] union members to whom such a viewpoint is treachery".[23] Much of this commentary was aimed at the South, where the *Brown* decision and the reemergence of a grassroots movement for racial equality triggered massive white resistance. But within a decade, especially after the civil rights movement began to shift its focus from south to north and from *de jure* to *de facto* segregation, "massive resistance", or "white back-lash", would be universally recognized as a national, not merely a southern, phenomenon; indeed, as the predominant characteristic of race relations in the North as well as the South. And white working-class communities in cities such as Boston, Chicago, Detroit and New York would be at the heart of this backlash. In explaining the alleged conser-vatism of the leadership of organized labor in relation to questions of race, one must look first to the attitudes and behavior of labor's white rank-and-file majority and to the kind of racialized democracy it practiced.

[22] Michael Goldfield, "Race and the CIO: The Possibilities for Racial Egalitarianism during the 1930s and 1940s", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 44 (1993), pp. 1–32, quoted on p. 11.

[23] Henry L. Trewhitt, "Southern Unions and the Integration Issue", *Reporter*, 4 October 1956, p. 27. For scholarly studies that emphasize the commitment of union leaders to racial equality in the face of white rank-and-file resistance, see August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York, 1979); Judith Stein, "Southern Workers in National Unions: Birmingham Steelworkers, 1936–1951", in Zieger, *Organized Labor in the Twentieth-Century South*, pp. 183–222; Draper, *Conflict of Interests*.

Here, too, the new labor history has given us a framework for understanding this phenomenon. In this case, it comes not from Thompson or Gutman but from a slender, under-appreciated book by Peter Friedlander entitled *The Emergence of a UAW Local* that was published in 1975. In his study of the emergence of a UAW local at an auto parts plant in the Polish-American enclave of Hamtramck, Michigan, Friedlander was concerned with identifying the character of working-class consciousness and culture, with understanding the development of unionism and the relationship between leadership and rank and file in the process, and with explaining how the UAW, the CIO's largest and most dynamic affiliate, had developed into a relatively conservative – that is, merely liberal – institution. These were characteristic concerns among the labor historians of Friedlander's generation. In many cases, their political identities had been forged in the heat of the turbulent 1960s; they were deeply disenchanted with the interest-group character of the liberalism that had emerged in the post-World War II era; and they saw the CIO unions as quintessential expressions of this phenomenon. They wondered, moreover, how all of the militancy of the 1930s could have led to such an outcome. Some of these historians argued that CIO leaders – John L. Lewis, Sidney Hillman, Walter Reuther, even the Communists – had sought institutional stability, and the achievement of their own power, at the expense of the militant self-activity of the CIO rank and file. For them, the history of the CIO was one of co-optation, repression and sell-out.[24]

Friedlander's study of Hamtramck offered a formidable challenge to this "New Left" or "anarcho-syndicalist" perspective. In fact, he turned its logic upside down. He saw unionism progressing through several characteristic stages. The first was the cadre stage, in which a militant – and, sometimes, radical – minority of workers took on the monumental task of organizing a union in the face of employer hostility and the inertia of the working-class majority. The second, and key, stage involved bringing the mass of workers – whom he regarded as passive and conservative – into the emerging union structure. Once the mass stage was achieved, he argued, the union was bound to become a reflection of the ideological characteristics and practical aspirations of its rank-and-file membership. Thus, the "expansion of the union was [. . .] a two-edged sword. If in theory the Left welcomed the chance to draw in the broad

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[24] Peter Friedlander, *The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936–1939: A Study in Class and Culture* (Pittsburgh, 1975). Important examples of the New Left critique of CIO unionism include Ronald Radosh, "The Corporate Ideology of American Labor Leaders from Gompers to Hillman", in James Weinstein and David W. Eakins (eds), *For a New America* (New York, 1970), pp. 125–152; Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (San Francisco, 1972); Staughton Lynd, "The Possibility of Radicalism in the Early 1930s: The Case of Steel", *Radical America*, 6 (1972), pp. 37–64; Alice Lynd and Staughton Lynd, *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers* (Boston, 1973).

mass of workers", in practice this meant a diminution of the Left's influence. For as it broadened its base, the UAW was influenced less and less by its radical founding cadre and more and more by "the church, the political machine, several kinds of rural Protestant conservatism, and a variety of local prepolitical subcultures" representative of the eastern and southern European immigrant groups that were an important component of the auto industry labor force.[25]

Friedlander's argument that the majority of industrial workers were passive and culturally conservative was reinforced by other studies published in the 1970s.[26] But his perspective was ultimately far too schematic and one-dimensional to be entirely persuasive. In fact, there were many different subcultures and political perspectives among rank-and-file workers, and not all of them led to the conservatism and passivity that he saw as normative. One could argue just as persuasively that, no matter how left-wing their political starting-point, the leaders of CIO affiliates ultimately found themselves at odds with union activists at the local level who were determined to use the union apparatus to maintain and extend the power of rank-and-file workers on the shop floor. Practically speaking, "rank and file" may have been defined broadly or in ways that reinforced the power of one group of workers at the expense of others, but nonetheless the shop-floor activism that was so deeply ingrained in many CIO locals was a threat to the stability and the broader perspective that CIO leaders saw as essential to their unions' survival. In his scintillating biography of Sidney Hillman, Steve Fraser captures the breadth – and contradictory crosscurrents – of rank-and-file assertiveness. He points out that Hillman and other CIO leaders had to contend "with outlaw insurgencies on the shop floor and with radicals frustrated by the deceleration of the New Deal, as well as with the suspicions of pious Catholic and anticommunist rank-and-file members alarmed by the CIO's egalitarian secularism".[27]

Although Friedlander's model may be too schematic in its portrayal of the stages of union development, it works very well indeed in

[25] Friedlander, *The Emergence of a UAW Local*, p. 131.

[26] For a provocative summary of these studies, see Melvyn Dubofsky, "Not So 'Turbulent Years': Another Look at the American 1930s", *Amerikastudien*, 24 (1979), pp. 5–20.

[27] Steven Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* (New York, 1991), p. 408. See also idem, "The 'Labor Question'", in Fraser and Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*, pp. 55–84. Other important studies which demonstrate that the leadership of the CIO was at odds with the localist, often militant, shop-floor unionism of the rank and file include Nelson Lichtenstein, "Auto Worker Militancy and the Structure of Factory Life, 1937–1955", *Journal of American History*, 67 (1980), pp. 335–353; idem, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Cambridge, 1982), esp. pp. 110–135, 178–202; Daniel Nelson, "Origins of the Sit-Down Era: Worker Militancy and Innovation in the Rubber Industry, 1934–38", *Labor History*, 23 (1982), pp. 198–225; Ronald Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of a Mass Consumer Society in Flint, Michigan* (New Brunswick, 1987), pp. 176–219; George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s*, revised ed. (Urbana, 1994).

explaining the relationship between "cadre" and "mass", and the character of the CIO unions themselves, in regard to issues of race. We will need more in-depth studies of particular unions and communities before we can draw any definitive conclusions, but it may not be premature to suggest that those studies will likely reinforce the emerging portrait of a leadership with a limited but real commitment to the cause of racial equality and a white majority that saw blacks not only as competitors for jobs and the often scarce resources of the larger society, but also as an alien phenomenon whose integration into the existing structures and subcultures of the white working class would be destabilizing and dangerous. While the passage of time has undermined the crude white supremacist norms that were once nearly pervasive in American society, and race relations have become far more complex than they were in the Jim Crow era, the determination of whites to maintain their racially-based material advantage, *and* the deeply-ingrained perception of African Americans as "Other", has not necessarily diminished. In 1954, working-class whites in Chicago expressed fear that the Supreme Court's famed *Brown* decision would be "a license for blacks to move into their neighborhoods, marry their women, and 'send the whole white race [. . .] downhill'". Thirty years later, investigators in the white working-class suburbs of Detroit found that such sensibilities had, if anything, become more intense. According to pollster Stanley Greenberg, whites who had defected from the Democratic party because of its close identification with the African-American struggle for full equality "express a profound distaste for blacks, a sentiment that pervades almost everything they think about government and politics". Among these "Reagan Democrats", Greenberg concluded, "Blacks constitute the explanation for their vulnerability and for almost everything that has gone wrong in their lives; not being black is what constitutes being middle class; not living with blacks is what makes a neighborhood a decent place to live."[28]

At the leadership level, it is important to emphasize both the *real* and the *limited* commitment to racial equality, and to identify the dynamic that has reinforced those limits. In the United Steelworkers' union, one of the CIO's largest and most important affiliates, the top

[28] In a provocative and insightful response to Michael Goldfield's article cited in note 22, Gary Gerstle argues that in assessing white working-class resistance to black demands for equality, historians must "broaden the focus", and take into account not only the neighborhood as well as the workplace, but also white "fears of sexual mixing and its consequences". See Gary Gerstle, "Working-Class Racism: Broaden the Focus", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 44 (1993), pp. 33–40, quoted on p. 35; Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960* (New York, 1983), pp. 68–99, 171–211, quoted on p. 196; Greenberg quoted in Thomas Byrne Edsall with Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York, 1991), p. 182.

officials – from the legendary Philip Murray to his more conservative and phlegmatic successor, David McDonald, to the "reformer" I.W. Abel – were unequivocal in their *rhetorical* commitment to the cause of racial equality. In the 1950s, the United Steelworkers became an important ally of the increasingly powerful civil rights lobby in Washington, DC, in state capitals, and in many municipalities. Moreover, the union supported the creation of fair employment practice legislation at every level and, in conjunction with prestigious academicians, conducted "human relations" seminars on university campuses and in numerous steel towns. At the same time, however, in spite of the passage of convention resolutions and the distribution of "thousands of pieces of high sounding literature", the Steelworkers' leadership remained reluctant to confront a deeply-entrenched employment structure that – in the North as well as the South – clearly favored the white union majority at the expense of the black minority. Indeed, some black steelworkers came to believe that the union's highly visible activity on behalf of civil rights in northern communities was intended as a substitute for confronting racial stratification in the workplace. Not that the leadership, comfortably entrenched in the union's international headquarters in Pittsburgh, had any stake in the continuation of this discriminatory pattern in the mills. But the leaders could not attack it directly because they knew all too well that the white majority would not tolerate such "betrayal", and that any real effort to remove the inequities in the mills' occupational structure could jeopardize the leadership's own job security, perhaps even the institutional survival of the union itself. Thus, the leadership temporized, passed more resolutions and nibbled at the edges of the system, until the issue was finally resolved by federal court intervention in which the companies *and the union* were the joint target of black steelworkers' demands for justice and restitution.[29]

To be sure, there were white "cadre" in the ranks of the Steelworkers' union and many other CIO affiliates who were deeply committed to the cause of racial equality, and who demonstrated this commitment in practice over a period of many years. Some of these individuals served as local union presidents; others were content to remain rank-and-filers, where their leavening voices engendered respect as well as controversy; a few managed to survive on the district and international union staffs. Largely because of the cadre's influence – along with the growing crescendo of black workers' demands for justice – the ideology of the

[29] Dennis C. Dickerson, *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875–1980* (Albany, 1986), p. 190; Bruce Nelson, "'CIO Meant One Thing for the Whites and Another Thing for Us'": Steelworkers and Civil Rights, 1936–1974", in Robert H. Zieger (ed.), *Essays in Recent Southern Labor History* (Knoxville, forthcoming); Hill, "Race, Ethnicity, and Organized Labor", pp. 68–70. See also John Hinshaw, "Dialectic of Division: Race and Power among Western Pennsylvania Steelworkers, 1935–1975" (Ph.D., Carnegie-Mellon University, 1995).

CIO always included a progressive and cosmopolitan vision of democracy that saw the achievement of substantive equality and full representation for African Americans and other minorities as integral to the unions' purpose. But the more cosmopolitan vision of the cadre was too often constrained by the parochial perspective of the "mass", which regarded democracy as an instrument to maintain the white majority's superior position in the face of the minority's increasingly insistent demands for equality. Here one voice can speak for many. The union "is run by the membership", said a local official in Mobile, Alabama, explaining how black workers had become "locked in" to unskilled jobs in a CIO-organized shipyard. And, "the whites outnumber the blacks".[30]

Although white resistance to black demands for equality constituted the main focal point of racial conflict in the CIO, it was not the only one. Indeed, the long-standing tendency to see race relations in bipolar terms can only serve to obscure the role of other "races" in American history. In his study of the historical origins of white supremacy in California, Tomas Almaguer explores how diverse peoples came together and competed for jobs and social space. European immigrants gained advantage in this competition by defining themselves as "white" and designating their African-American, Asian, Mexican and native-American competitors as "nonwhite". For Almaguer, there are two critical lessons in this process of historical development: first, "race, not class, became the central stratifying variable" in the structuring of inequality in California; and secondly, "how people are defined as 'white' or 'nonwhite' is never a self-evident process".[31]

Given the CIO's concentration in the nation's industrial heartland, and the volatile impact and long-term significance of African-American migration to manufacturing centers such as Chicago, Detroit and Pitts-

[30] Stanley B. Greenberg, *Race and State in Capitalist Development: Comparative Perspectives* (New Haven, 1980), pp. 348–349; Nelson, "Organized Labor and the Struggle for Black Equality in Mobile during World War II", p. 988.

[31] Tomas Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley, 1994), pp. 12, 9. In regard to the definition of groups as "white" or "nonwhite", James Barrett and David Roediger have begun to explore the process by which immigrants from southern and eastern Europe shed their status as "inbetween people" and gradually became white. In doing so, they have added another – vitally important – layer of complexity to the study of race and ethnicity in American history. See James Barrett and David Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality, and the New Immigrant Working Class" (paper presented at the Commonwealth Fund Conference, University College London, 18 February 1995); and David R. Roediger, "Whiteness and Ethnicity in the History of 'White Ethnics' in the United States", in Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London, 1994), pp. 181–198. For provocative studies of how Irish immigrants laid claim to the wages of whiteness, see Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, vol. 1: *Racial Oppression and Social Control* (London, 1994), and Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, 1995).

burgh, it is understandable that the study of race and labor in the CIO era has focused mainly on black-white relations in basic industry. But even in Chicago and Detroit there were important concentrations of Mexican workers. By the mid-1920s, they made up about 25 per cent of the hourly workforce at Inland Steel, and smaller but still significant percentages at other steel, auto and meatpacking plants. As the CIO expanded westward it encountered many more ethnic Mexicans, in the copper mines of the Southwest and the food processing plants of California; and Asians – mainly Chinese, Japanese and Filipinos – in the salmon canneries of California and the Pacific Northwest. In recent years historians such as Chris Friday, Mario Garcia, Vicki Ruiz and Zaragosa Vargas have begun to integrate the history of these groups into the larger fabric of labor – and American – history, thereby making possible a fuller and more adequate portrait of the intersection of class, race and ethnicity in the CIO era.[32]

This pioneering scholarship has already demonstrated that race is a far more complex and elusive construct than we had imagined. My own work on longshoremen in San Pedro, the heart of the port of Los Angeles, has indicated exactly that. Although white and black workers in San Pedro defined themselves, and each other, in racial terms, the saga of their union, ILWU Local 13, was not merely a story in black and white. For from the very beginning of unionism's resurgence on the Los Angeles waterfront in the 1930s, ethnic Mexicans were a part of the dock labor force. Gradually they became a formidable presence in Local 13. In fact, numerically and politically, they would eventually dominate the local – which makes it all the more remarkable that in the reflections of white and black longshoremen, "Mexicans" were rarely part of the frame of reference. Race relations meant the relations between blacks and whites; and the Los Angeles waterfront was, allegedly, "lily white" until the appearance of African Americans during World War II.[33]

As the competition for place and preferment on the docks became a three-way affair, the dominant white majority saw Mexicans as far less

[32] Chris Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor: The Pacific Coast Canned-Salmon Industry, 1870–1942* (Philadelphia, 1994); Mario T. Garcia, "Border Proletarians: Mexican-Americans and the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, 1939–1946", in Robert Asher and Charles Stephenson (eds), *Labor Divided: Race and Ethnicity in United States Labor Struggles, 1835–1960* (Albany, 1990), pp. 83–104; Vicki L. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930–1950* (Albuquerque, 1987); Zaragosa Vargas, *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917–1933* (Berkeley, 1993). For useful introductions to the literature on Asian and Latina and Latino workers, see Chris Friday, "Asian American Labor and Historical Interpretation", *Labor History*, 35 (1995), pp. 524–546; Camille Guerin-Gonzales, "Conversing Across Boundaries of Race, Ethnicity, Class, Gender, and Region: Latino and Latina Labor History", *ibid.*, pp. 547–563.

[33] Nelson, "The 'Lords of the Docks' Reconsidered".

threatening than blacks. For many whites, blacks represented the nega-
tion of the status and self-image they cherished. But Mexicans increas-
ingly were regarded as an *ethnic* group – akin, perhaps, to Scandinavians,
Italians, and even "hay shakers" from the Midwest – and hence as a
legitimate presence on the docks and in the union's internal life. In such
circumstances, Mexicans apparently saw no advantage for themselves in
uniting with blacks to challenge the power of the white majority. On
the contrary, such an alliance may well have appeared to be a path
toward marginalization and exclusion. And relative to blacks, they had
a number of distinct advantages. In 1940 they outnumbered blacks by
about three to one in the city, and their margin increased over the
years. Their community base was not only larger, but much more
cohesive. Indeed, despite the persistence of segregation and discrimina-
tion, Los Angeles was becoming the "Mexican capital of the United
States".[34]

Above all, Mexican longshoremen were on a mission to establish an
"ethnic niche" on the waterfront, as a means to enhance the economic
security of their families and *compadres*. In what became a *de facto*
competition with blacks, they mixed more easily with whites, and in
many cases shared some of their prejudice toward African Americans.
Moreover, they used their greater seniority, and greater access to the
levers of power within the union, to take care of their own. In the
process, their very success contributed to the continued marginalization
of blacks.[35]

In the quest for a fuller and more inclusive study of the American
working class, the issue of gender – like race – has come to the forefront
in recent years. The dynamic field of women's history has not only
brought "herstory" closer to the male and pale mainstream; it has also
mounted an increasingly insistent – and effective – challenge to what
Alice Kessler-Harris has characterized as "the remarkably male terms
in which class is still defined". For the era of industrial unionism,
historians such as Patricia Cooper, Bruce Fehn, Nancy Gabin, Ruth
Milkman and Sharon Hartman Strom have demonstrated the presence
of women in CIO unions *and* the raw deal they often received at the

[34] *Ibid.*; Ricardo Romo, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio* (Austin, 1983), p. 170;
George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano
Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York, 1993).

[35] On the development of a labor market "niche" as a means of furthering the economic
status and security of an ethnic group, see Suzanne Modell, "The Ethnic Niche and the
Structure of Opportunity: Immigrants and Minorities in New York", in Michael B. Katz
(ed.), *The "Underclass" Debate: Views from History* (Princeton, 1993), pp. 161–193. To
my knowledge, the relationship between black and Mexican workers is largely unexplored
territory. Zaragosa Vargas emphasizes the common experience of discrimination, but also
the competition between Mexicans and African Americans, in *Proletarians of the North*,
pp. 86–123. Vicki Ruiz offers some dramatic examples of solidarity among blacks, Mex-
icans, and whites in *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*.

hands of male unionists.[36] In contrast to the issue of race, where union leaders often held positions that were more progressive than those of the rank and file, insensitivity to the needs of women workers was almost as pronounced at the leadership level of the CIO as it was at the grassroots. As Robert Zieger reminds us, "CIO leaders were committed to traditional family wage concepts and displayed little awareness of the growing presence of women in the labor force. In their mind, they had built their unions with little help from women, whom they tended to regard as a weak link in the workingman's commitment to the union cause."[37]

Even in workplaces that were exclusively male, gender was pervasive, because socially constructed notions of masculinity and femininity were at the heart of people's identities. We know, from the writings of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall and others, that gender identities were racialized, and that whites often projected demonic images onto black – especially black male – sexuality.[38] My study of shipyard workers during World

[36] Alice Kessler Harris, "Treating the Male as 'Other': Re-defining the Parameters of Labor History", *Labor History*, 34 (1993), pp. 190–204, quoted on p. 192; Patricia Cooper, "The Faces of Gender: Sex Segregation and Work Relations at Philco, 1928–1938", in Ava Baron (ed.), *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca, 1991), pp. 320–350; Bruce Fehn, "'Chickens Come Home to Roost': Industrial Reorganization, Seniority, and Gender Conflict in the United Packinghouse Workers of America, 1955–1966", *Labor History*, 34 (1993), pp. 324–341; Nancy Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Auto Workers, 1935–1975* (Ithaca, 1990); Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (Urbana, 1987); Sharon Hartman Strom, "Challenging 'Woman's Place': Feminism, the Left, and Industrial Unionism in the 1930s", *Feminist Studies*, 9 (1983), pp. 359–386; idem, "'We're No Kitty Foyles': Organizing Office Workers for the Congress of Industrial Organizations, 1937–1950", in Ruth Milkman (ed.), *Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labor History* (Boston, 1985), pp. 206–234. See also Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915–1945* (Chapel Hill, 1991); and *Labor History*, 34 (1993), a special issue edited by Elizabeth Faue and devoted entirely to the theme of "Gender and the Reconstruction of Labor History".
[37] Zieger, *The CIO*, p. 350. Some CIO unions, especially those with Left leadership and a large percentage of female members, had a much better record on women's issues than others. Vicki Ruiz offers a positive assessment of the Left-led United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers (UCAPAWA) in *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*, pp. 87–102; and Mark McColloch does the same for the United Electrical Workers (UE) in "The Shop-Floor Dimension of Union Rivalry: The Case of Westinghouse in the 1950s", in *The CIO's Left-Led Unions*, pp. 183–199.
[38] Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "'The Mind that Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape, and Racial Violence", in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (eds), *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York, 1983), pp. 328–349; George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (1971; rpt. Middletown, 1987), pp. 273–282; Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York, 1984); Nancy MacLean, "The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Making of Reactionary Populism", *Journal of American History*, 78 (1991), pp. 917–948.

War II demonstrates that even the – demonstrably false – rumor of black male proximity to white females in the workplace could lead to vicious assaults on African Americans, in a desperate attempt to shore up Jim Crow's sagging ramparts. In the coalfields of Alabama, however, Daniel Letwin has argued that the "absence of women from the mines [. . .] served quietly, but significantly, to open up space for an interracial labor movement" among black and white men under the banner of the United Mine Workers of America. Studies such as Letwin's, and Dolores Janiewski's nuanced discussion of "sisterhood denied" in the relations between black and white women tobacco workers in North Carolina, represent the beginnings of an exploration that will interweave the socially constructed meaning of gender with the complex – and equally contingent – realities of class and race.[39]

As studies of the intersection of class, race and gender multiply, complexity and contingency have become the watchwords. Those who emphasize the vital importance of race in the shaping of workers' identities and the forging of relations among working people on the job and in the larger society are confronted with the warning that race is "no simple, ahistoric matter"; that it "is more a contingent influence than an ultimate cause".[40] One way of heeding this caveat is to identify the generational dimensions of workers' experience. This may turn out to be particularly fruitful with regard to the overlapping eras that saw the volatile intersection of the labor and civil rights movements. During this period there was an undeniable accommodation on the part of white workers to the presence of African Americans in the industrial workforce and in the unions that emerged under the umbrella of the CIO. But this accommodation seldom led to the genuine integration of the work-place, the unions, and the neighborhoods where workers lived. What seems mainly to have occurred is a shifting of the boundaries of resistance and a refinement of the language and ideology that sanctioned the wages of whiteness. This process of development will need much more exploration before any definitive conclusions can be drawn, but research will surely indicate that there was a distinctive – and largely separate – "CIO experience" for white workers and for blacks.

For black workers, the process of development appears to have been marked by more readily identifiable signs of discontinuity. In the late

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[39] Nelson, "Organized Labor and the Struggle for Black Equality in Mobile during World War II", pp. 952, 978–981; Daniel Letwin, "Interracial Unionism, Gender, and 'Social Equality' in the Alabama Coalfields, 1878–1908", *Journal of Southern History*, 41 (1995), pp. 519–554, quoted on p. 544; Dolores E. Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender, and Class in a New South Community* (Philadelphia, 1985), pp. 3–7, and *passim*.

[40] Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919–1929* (New York, 1994), quoted on p. 9; Arnesen, "'Like Banquo's Ghost, It Will Not Down'", pp. 1601–1607; Alan Dawley and Joe William Trotter, Jr, "Race and Class", *Labor History*, 35 (1994), pp. 486–494, quoted on p. 493.

1930s African Americans responded unevenly to the call of the CIO; even within particular industries there were sharply different patterns in different companies and geographical areas. By World War II, however, blacks were becoming decidedly pro-union, often much more so than whites. And in terms of wages, benefits and protection on the job, union affiliation paid clear dividends to blacks, which only reinforced their commitment to the CIO and its affiliates. But by and large the industrial union movement did *not* challenge the segmented labor markets that advantaged whites relative to African Americans; nor, beyond a few Left-led enclaves where blacks constituted a majority or a strategic and well-organized minority, did the CIO encourage or even tolerate militant activism in the cause of racial equality. Indeed, as race became a more divisive issue during the civil rights era, CIO leaders tended to run scared in the face of white backlash and even, in Robert Zieger's words, to "relegate African American workers to the margins".[41]

By the late 1940s, perhaps earlier, this hard reality had begun to undermine the confidence that black workers had placed in the CIO. Increasingly, they began to organize autonomously at the local level, and nationally through the Negro American Labor Council; and to turn to civil rights groups for assistance in confronting the pattern of racial discrimination that companies and unions maintained in factory, mine and mill. In the 1960s, especially after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), black union veterans relied upon federal courts and administrative agencies as allies in their increasingly bitter confrontation with employers and unions. To be sure, many – indeed, most – of these workers recognized that without unions their road would have been much harder and less secure. Nonetheless, a sense of disappointment, even disillusionment, welled up in them and would not down. Thus, in 1962, a black steelworker in Atlanta, Georgia, spoke not only for himself but for a generation of his fellow workers when he declared that "we were the first to come out for the union. We helped get it started here [. . .] But now they – the whites – get all the benefits and we are left behind again. Turned out CIO meant one thing for the whites and another thing for us."[42]

[41] Zieger, *The CIO*, p. 345.
[42] Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York, 1989), pp. 309–310; Norrell, "'Caste in Steel', pp. 689–690; Nelson, "'CIO Meant One Thing for the Whites and Another Thing for Us'"; William H. Harris, *The Harder We Run: Black Workers since the Civil War* (New York, 1982), pp. 140–142, 147–177; Paula F. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge, 1990), pp. 206–239; Nathaniel Brown, interviewed by Herbert Hill, 21 October 1962, Atlanta, Georgia, Personal Papers of Herbert Hill, Madison, Wisconsin; used with Herbert Hill's permission.