

Book Review: The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s & 1940s by Michael Goldfield

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Goldfield, Michael. *The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s & 1940s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. IX + 432 pages. Hardcover, \$49.95.

In *The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s & 1940s*, political scientist Michael Goldfield places a critical lens on the valiant but mostly unsuccessful efforts of Southern labor organizers throughout the 1930s and 1940s to unionize industry workers within the region. Goldfield argues that organizers' inability to create an interracial union, primarily due to their eventual cowing to the region's broader cultural politics that favored racism and anti-communism sentiments, set the stage for the modern-day socio-political culture of the Southern labor industry and the broader South in general.

In Goldfield's assessment, black Southern laborers' involvement in unionization was "the key" in the step towards greater worker protections and rights. This is perhaps a bit of an idealistic assessment at best. Racism, after all, was deeply entrenched in nearly every aspect of Southern culture. Thus, one has to wonder that if organizers had attempted to break down the color-line in order to create a multi-racial union, would industry leaders and the Southern governments, who were already racially-biased, have willingly agreed to their demands and upheld workers rights? This seems unlikely, and this hints at a multi-layered issue that extends past just simply labor and union complications and into more complex socio-cultural issues that continue to underlay much of the South.

Nevertheless, Goldfield provides a much-needed look into unionization failures and their consequences in the interim period between the Great Depression and the start of the Cold War. This period has been inundated with scholarship that outlines the successful attempts of organizers and the progress that unions made in terms of labor rights. Thus, it is refreshing to see a book take a slightly more critical look at the era that underscores its failures. To do this, Goldfield

investigates four primary Southern labor industries: mining, coal, steel, and textiles and the varied efforts used by organizations to unionize them. This in and of itself is an overwhelming undertaking, and one wonders if, at times, it would have been more apt for Goldfield to narrow his focus to one particular industry instead of four in order to provide a more nuanced approach to unionization efforts. Likewise, since Goldfield attempted to create a broader study of labor organizations and their unionization within the South, it seems odd that agriculture is missing from the framework. Agriculture remained a primary labor source within the area and had a rich and varied history of low wage labor and racial tensions, much like the other industries profiled within the book. It would be interesting to see how attempts to unionize farmers compared with attempts made within the other industries profiled in this book, especially considering that the National Farmers Union had been founded in 1902 and had already made inroads in Southern farming communities. The efforts of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, which was founded in 1934, would have also been another particularly interesting avenue of research to explore as well and may have provided Goldfield with more opportunities to explore how class and racial divides continued to hamper labor organization within the deep South.

Another important topic that remains absent from Goldfield's study of Southern labor is gender. The Great Depression and WWII had resulted in the large-scale employment of women within the industrial sector, momentarily subverting long-held gender norms concerning women's roles outside of the home environment. If Goldfield asserts that a racially diverse union could have permanently altered the Southern work environment and Southern politics, would the organization of women workers have had the same effect? Likewise, would the unionization of women have aided in protecting the jobs they ultimately lost in the aftermath of the war, thereby creating a more

open and welcoming path towards women's rights in the South that would have perhaps found a home in second-wave feminism in the coming decades? These are interesting questions to ponder.

Overall, *The Southern Key* provides an insightful and comprehensive overview of unionization in the South during the 1930s and 1940s. It is also an extremely apt read in this current age in which socialism and workers' rights have once again become particularly heated talking points. Thus, the *Southern Key* is an essential read for political scientists, labor, and Southern historians who wish to gain insight into why the idea of unionization and workers' rights remains controversial in significant sectors of the United States in our current modern age.

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