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Workers, Racism and History: A Response

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Workers, Racism and History: A Response

Abstract

[Excerpt] This intimate dependence of white egalitarianism upon black exclusion forms the central theme of Herbert Hill's essay. Arguing that this condition is neither episodic nor solely of historical interest, Hill asserts that these racist attitudes (and the action that flowed from them) were systemic across two centuries of working class development and actually provide the central continuous rationale for understanding institutional trade union activity from the early nineteenth century into the present. America's labor unions, Hill writes, are "the institutional expression of white working class racism, and of policies and practices that resulted in unequal access, dependent on race, to employment and union membership." (p. 31) In Hill's perception, as in that of "A Colored Philadelphian" in 1830, the opposition of white workers to class categories based upon "unnatural and artificial distinctions, independent of merit" collapses when confronted with a caste system based on racial prejudice. This understanding is essential if one is to comprehend much in both labor's past and present. How else to understand those radicalized workers in the American Railway Union who, in the midst of their monumental struggle with the Pullman Corporation in 1894, proudly boasted of their commitment to that egalitarian tradition by publicizing the fact that their convention delegates vetoed union president Eugene V. Debs's motion that black workers be included in the movement. The rejection of even their leader's motion, the union newspaper ingenuously asserted, confirmed for the rank and file their organization's commitment to internal democratic procedures.

This central perception in Hill's essay reflects certain important aspects in recent American historiography. As Edmund Morgan has suggested in his stunning history of colonial Virginia, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, that juncture of slavery and freedom, defined by racial categories and intensified by class antagonisms, has its origins in the very core of the American experiment. As the nation developed, neither working people nor their institutions remained separate from that reality. Alexander Saxton also made that point quite clearly in his study of immigrant Chinese-white working class relations in California in the late nineteenth century. A racist attitude, first formed in the context of black-white relations, dominated this encounter, Saxton argued, and to a great extent determined the structure, orientation and political vision of the California labor movement into the twentieth century. More recently Gwendolyn Mink has built upon these insights in examining the role of nativism and racism in structuring organized labor's response to immigration restriction. In addition, she has argued, the racism evident in the legislative battles over immigration dominated organized labor's search for a viable political alliance on the national level. Hill's essay shares some of these insights yet its overall tone is nonetheless troublesome for at least three interrelated reasons. The essay is conceptually ahistorical, far too selective when it does use historical evidence and is ultimately more of a lawyer's brief than a reasoned analysis.

Keywords

labor movement, working class, racism, labor unions

Disciplines

Labor History | Labor Relations | Race and Ethnicity | Unions

Comments

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DISCUSSION

Race, Ethnicity & Organized Labor

The comments below are in response to Herbert Hill's article, "Race, Ethnicity and Organized Labor: The Opposition to Affirmative Action" which appeared in our last issue, Volume 1, No. 2, Winter 1987. In our Editors' Corner we predicted that the article would prove controversial and so it has, as evidenced by the discussion that follows, and the rejoinder by Herbert Hill.

Workers, Racism and History: A Response

Nick Salvatore

IN 1828 THE ARTISANS OF PHILADELPHIA CREATED the first political party in the United States explicitly concerned with the interests of the working classes. The nucleus of the movement emerged from the strike, led by the carpenters and others in the building trades a year earlier, for the ten hour day. As their movement sought a more overt political expression through the Workingmen's Party, their demands grew as well. Ten hours remained important, but to that demand were added calls for free public education, a mechanic's lien law and an end to imprisonment for debt. Moreover, an explicitly egalitarian political vision framed these specific demands. As one Working Men's Republic Political Association expressed that vision in 1830, "There appears to exist two distinct classes, the rich and the poor . . . the one seeking to introduce amongst us invidious and artificial distinctions . . . while the other party declare that all men are created free and equal . . . and that unnatural and artificial distinctions, independent of merit, are pernicious in their effects and deleterious in their consequences."¹ As a legitimizing ideology, appeals to republican egalitarianism were embedded at the very core of this first workingmen's movement and that ideology remained important in the social and institutional development of working people and their union organizations throughout the nineteenth century. In that same year, 1830, however, one of

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Philadelphia's almost 10,000 free blacks suggested a quite different side of that egalitarian tradition. "If a man of color has children," "A Colored Philadelphian" noted, "It is almost impossible for him to get a trade for them, as the journeymen and apprentices generally refuse to work with them, even if the master is willing, which is seldom the case."²

This intimate dependence of white egalitarianism upon black exclusion forms the central theme of Herbert Hill's essay. Arguing that this condition is neither episodic nor solely of historical interest, Hill asserts that these racist attitudes (and the action that flowed from them) were systemic across two centuries of working class development and actually provide the central continuous rationale for understanding institutional trade union activity from the early nineteenth century into the present. America's labor unions, Hill writes, are "the institutional expression of white working class racism, and of policies and practices that resulted in unequal access, dependent on race, to employment and union membership." (p. 31) In Hill's perception, as in that of "A Colored Philadelphian" in 1830, the opposition of white workers to class categories based upon "unnatural and artificial distinctions, independent of merit" collapses when confronted with a caste system based on racial prejudice. This understanding is essential if one is to comprehend much in both labor's past and present. How else to understand those radicalized workers in the American Railway Union who, in the midst of their monumental struggle with the Pullman Corporation in 1894, proudly boasted of their commitment to that egalitarian tradition by publicizing the fact that their convention delegates vetoed union president Eugene V. Debs's motion that black workers be included in the movement. The rejection of even their leader's motion, the union newspaper ingenuously asserted, confirmed for the rank and file their organization's commitment to internal democratic procedures.³

This central perception in Hill's essay reflects certain important aspects in recent American historiography. As Edmund Morgan has suggested in his stunning history of colonial Virginia, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, that juncture of slavery and freedom, defined by racial categories and intensified by class antagonisms, has its origins in the very core of the American experiment. As the nation developed, neither working people nor their institutions remained separate from that reality. Alexander Saxton also made that point quite clearly in his study of immigrant Chinese-white working class relations in California in the late nineteenth century. A racist attitude, first formed in the context of black-white relations, dominated this encounter, Saxton argued, and to a great extent determined the structure, orientation and political vision of the California labor movement into the twentieth century. More recently Gwendolyn Mink has built upon these insights in examining the role of nativism and racism in structuring organized labor's response to immigration restriction. In addition, she has argued, the racism evident in the legislative battles over immigration dominated organized labor's search for a viable political alliance on the national level.⁴ Hill's essay shares some of these insights yet its overall tone is nonetheless troublesome for at least three interrelated reasons. The essay is conceptually ahistorical, far too selective when it does use historical evidence and is ultimately more of a lawyer's brief than a reasoned analysis.

This lack of historicity is evident at a most basic level. The relentless repetition of the argument that labor unions are the institutional expression of white working class racism allows no room for nuance or contrary evidence. There is no comprehension evident that labor has changed in any fashion over the previous two centuries. As a result the basic analytical framework for historical work—the study of the intricate, at times ambiguous, dialectic between change and continuity over time in a given historical

context—is nowhere to be found. Rather, in this essay, the racism evident in the labor movement transcends mere time and place and occupies a perch far removed from the culture and society that movement interacted with over time. Hill encourages this lack of historicity quite clearly in his discussion of the “Labor Zeitgeist” (pp. 43–45), where he argues that labor should have simply transcended itself and the society around it in the nineteenth century. Lacking that magic wand, the labor movement is then categorized as historically inimicable to the interests of black working men and women—and essentially dismissed. One need not agree with all of Barbara J. Fields’s provocative argument concerning race and class in America to concur in her critique of those who would accord the idea of race “a transhistorical, almost metaphysical, status that removes it from all possibility of analysis and understanding.”³ That remains a central problem in Hill’s essay.

ON A MORE SPECIFIC LEVEL AS WELL, HILL’S argument is misleading and ahistorical in its use of evidence, as his long extract from Samuel Gompers’s autobiography (pp. 38–39) makes clear. In the selected version presented, one would think that Gompers’s *sole* motivation in structuring membership requirements for admission to the American Federation of Labor was “the question of a people’s assimilability.” By definition, as Hill then writes, “the Chinese, Japanese and Afro-Americans were ‘unassimilable,’ hence proscribed.” A less polemical reading of Gompers’s career suggests a more complex reality. Gompers, of course, had no power as Federation president to set membership requirements for the affiliated unions, who jealously guarded that and other prerogatives. But in the 1890s Gompers did intervene in an attempt to force the International Association of Machinists to remove, as a condition of membership, the whites only clause from its national constitution. That he won but a pyrrhic victory (racial criteria remained in place in local constitutions) is true, but how to understand that Gompers from Hill’s presentation?

Most importantly, Hill’s selections from the relevant chapter in Gompers’s autobiography leaves the impression that racial categories were the sole criteria utilized by Gompers. This is important for Hill’s argument in that it reinforces his point that white ethnics employed labor’s institutions to deny admission and the consequent economic benefits of unionization to people of color. That Gompers had a deep antagonism toward people of color is clear but a fair reading of the autobiography must recognize that a somewhat different set of criteria structured Gompers’s responses. As Gompers suggested in his discussion of Bohemian immigrant workers, they were worthy of even limited respect in his eyes only when “they had identified themselves with the effort to work out the problems of our industry.” The first step in “Americanizing them was to bring them to conform to American standards of work, which was a stepping stone to American standards of life.” Moreover, if they refused such efforts at uplift orchestrated by the labor movement, Gompers had but one epithet for them. They were “foreigners,” he repeatedly asserted, with the force and power of the biblical injunction against strangers.⁶ This is important to recognize for it underscores the fact that, by 1900 at least, Gompers’s intent (reflecting as well the intent of most union presidents) was to concentrate organizing efforts on the skilled workers in the trades. This policy, in turn, placed membership in the Federation beyond the reach of most blacks, Chinese, Japanese and white European immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Whatever one thinks of Gompers (and I for one have been critical of him on these and other issues),⁷ the fact remains that he does not represent the unified white working class’s institutional response to black workers. Indeed, until the 1930s, most white ethnics and people of color were treated alike by the Federation: they were excluded for, in organized labor’s eyes, they

failed to meet even the most basic requirement for admittance to that American standard of life.

This joint exclusion, however, did not then mean that black and white ethnic workers found common cause and overcame racial antagonisms. In the CIO as in the AFL, these antagonisms persisted but the new union movement consciously attempted to relegate those tensions to a more private sphere. The public sphere—that is, the institutional life of the union—officially occupied a placed beyond such concerns. As it was expressed at the 1936 convention of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, "Our permanent activities are in the industrial field . . . nothing should interfere with our industrial unity, which is our most precious asset."⁸ The most dramatic example of this effort concerned the UAW's actions in Detroit before and during the war. The white international officers of the union, working in close alliance with the local and national NAACP and an important segment of Detroit's black clergy, brought to bear the institutional powers of persuasion and coercion the union possessed to demand for black workers equal treatment in the factory *and* in the union.⁹ This does not mean that racism disappeared but the fact that such an important and sustained effort by a union goes unnoticed in Hill's essay causes serious question about the polemical intent of the author.

Similar questions about this intent emerge when reading Hill's eleven page dissection of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. I agree with Herbert Hill that it is odd, to say the least, that the radical and gender composition of the ILGWU's leadership has remained largely constant over eighty years while its membership has been transformed by the inclusion of at least three major groups of workers: blacks, Hispanics and, more recently, Asians. Similarly, and in contrast with the UAW experience cited above, Hill's critique of the ILGWU leadership's use of institutional power to exclude those deemed "foreigners" is well taken. But I remain quite unconvinced that either the ILGWU or the United Federation of Teachers during the 1960s (whom Hill discusses in a footnote) were then or remain today sufficiently representative examples of labor's attitudes on race, class and ethnicity to stand as the movement's symbol. Where, for example, is there an analysis of the meaning of Stanley Hill's emergence as the first black leader of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees' powerful District 37? Where, in Herbert Hill's analysis, is there recognition of the growing numbers of minority leaders on the local and regional level in a number of public sector unions? Where also is there recognition of the militant, multi-racial and ethnic organizing drives among hotel workers in Boston, garment workers in Los Angeles and nursing home workers across the country? As Robert Kuttner has argued, these efforts are less than adequate at present but it is also true that, where they are in place, such organizing drives bring into the local leadership a new group that accurately reflects the complex composition of the union.¹⁰ Finally, in a more depressing mood, where in Hill's analysis is there room for serious treatment of the complex and painful circumstances that led Leon Davis, Doris Turner and others to unwittingly bring the Hospital Workers Union (1199) almost to the brink of destruction? In short, there is much that needs discussion and analysis concerning the racial, ethnic and gender composition of both the membership and leadership of the contemporary union movement. Angry bolts of lightning, however grounded some twenty or more years ago, can momentarily illuminate but not sustain the needed inquiry.

DESPITE THE DIFFICULTIES I HAVE WITH HERBERT HILL'S ESSAY I am very glad he published it. That essay, and the forthcoming book it is adopted from, should present a serious challenge to contemporary labor historians. As this field has developed over the last three decades, we have learned much concerning the social and cultural lives of

working people. However unintentional, though, a rather curious dichotomy has emerged. While many "new" labor historians are aggressively political in the historical postures they assume, fiercely protective of working class agency and self-direction in their analysis, and supremely confident that they have found, in this working class, the source of virtue for the Republic, the history itself often remains a study of largely white men and women, some of whom are affiliated with the institutional labor movement. While ethnicity and gender concerns have begun to find a voice within the literature, racial themes remain all too often segregated within adjoining professional subcategories. I hope that work such as Hill's forces others to examine as well those systemic questions he asks. Hill's answers, I think, lack a necessary historical perspective essential for understanding these attitudes in context over time. But the complaint of "A Colored Philadelphian" echoes down to our own time, if in altered fashion. For historical understanding and for contemporary concerns, then, we need to more fully integrate our collective discussion of race and class, even if we must therefore lose some self-assuredness about the prophetic role of the American working class.

NOTES

1. John R. Commons, et al., *History of Labour in the United States* (New York, 1918, 2 vols.), II: 193.
2. Quoted in Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850: The Shadow of the Dream* (Chicago, 1986), 19.
3. *Railway Times*, 2 July 1894.
4. Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York, 1975); Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley, 1971); Gwendolyn Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development: Union, Party, and State, 1875-1920* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1986).
5. Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (eds.), *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York, 1982), 144.
6. Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (New York, 1925, 2 vols.), II: 151-52.
7. See the introduction to Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, edited by Nick Salvatore (Ithaca, N.Y., 1984).
8. Quoted in Gerd Korman, "Ethnic Democracy and Its Ambiguities," *American Jewish History*, LXXV, 4 (June 1986), 411-12.
9. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York, 1979).
10. Robert Kuttner, "Will Unions Organize Again?," *Dissent* (Winter 1987), 52-62.