

Southern Labor Studies Conference

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The Southern Labor Studies Conference, which took place October 2–4, 1986, at Georgia State University in Atlanta, encompassed academic, popular, and political themes. The academic sessions revealed the breadth of current research on both southern and non-southern labor topics. Papers presented included case studies relating to the coal industry (Harold W. Aurand of Pennsylvania State University on work training in the anthracite industry between 1900 and 1930, and Karin A. Shapiro of Yale University on the east Tennessee coal miners' rebellion of 1891–92); "common and uncommon laborers" (John P. Beck of the United Paperworkers' Union on the iron ore trimmers of the upper Great Lakes, 1880–1900, and Colin Davis of the State University of New York at Binghamton on the 1922 railroad shopmen's strike); urban Afro-American history (Earl Lewis of the University of California at Berkeley on the need for a new model of urban black history for the southern context, and Eric Arnesen of Yale University on work rules and race relations on the New Orleans waterfront, 1880–1902); the modern textile industry of South Carolina (Linda Frankel of the University of Michigan on the 1958 Harriet-Henderson textile strike, and James A. Dunlap III of the University of South Carolina on South Carolina management in the 1980s); and free labor and industrial labor before the Civil War (Lawrence McDonnell of Johns Hopkins University on the Charleston Typographical Union on the eve of Secession, and Paul Finkelman of the State University of New York at Binghamton on industrial law and slavery).

While these case studies add important dimensions to the growing body of literature on southern workers, there was little thematic or theoretical unity to bind the papers together or to provide a focus to commentaries and discussion. While such unity is not absolutely necessary, future conferences might be strengthened by efforts to place case studies into a larger framework. What precisely defines the field of southern labor history? How does it reflect or differ from the historiographical perspectives of the new labor and social history? What issues and perspectives define the field of southern labor studies that has emerged over the past decade? The keynote address by Melvin Dubofsky (SUNY-Binghamton) on the sweeping themes of solidarity and fragmentation

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in American working-class history, while ably constructed, could hardly supply this kind of cohesion on its own.

The interplay of solidarity and fragmentation will, however, serve as the organizing theme for a volume currently under preparation containing papers from the conference, to be published by the University of Alabama Press under the editorship of Gary Fink, Leslie Hough, and Merl E. Reed.

The conference went well beyond the standard academic parameters. Particularly noteworthy was the appearance of Stetson Kennedy, the southern labor writer-activist from the early days of the CIO, as commentator for a panel on the CIO in the South "fifty years later." His comments on papers by Ralph Peters (Joseph T. Walker School, Marietta), Nancy A. White (Mt. Vernon College), and Brian S. Abrams (University of Massachusetts, Amherst) stirred lively debate over the extent of class consciousness and racial egalitarianism in the southern CIO. He closed his reminiscences with the sobering reflection that "the Axis and the Klan were a picnic" compared to what the labor movement of the 1980s faces. "You worry about it," he added, "and I'm going fishing." Further enlivening the conference was a presentation of the "Working Lives" radio documentary on the history the black industrial workers of Birmingham, Alabama, currently being produced by the University of Alabama's Archive of American Minority Cultures. Clifford Kuhn presented an excerpt from the series, which featured a captivating blend of recollections, speeches, and music. The commentators were Herman Taylor and George Averhart, both Birmingham steelworkers and members of the Steelworkers' union who participated in the series.

Nor was the conference confined strictly to southern topics. The organizers worked admirably to bring in sessions on current labor issues from a range of contexts, including the story and aftermath of the PATCO strike (Terrance Shannon, PATCO and Georgia State University), the *British miners' strike* (John Field, University of Warwick), the recent strike in Guatemala against that venerated centerpiece of the New South, Coca-Cola (Frank LaRue, Guatemalan labor lawyer). The conditions and strategies of southern working people have long been shaped by their region's colonial position in an international economy; attention to international labor issues at this conference, then, seemed entirely fitting.